



N.T.G.



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*To*

*The people of show business*

*The chorus girls*

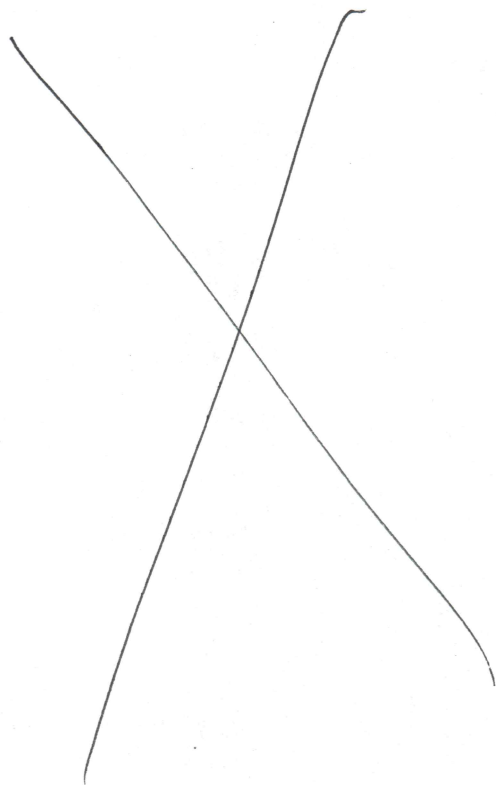
*The bit players*

*The stars*

*The backstage gang*

*For they have been my life*





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X

*Blondes, Brunettes, and Bullets*



X

# 1

## *O.K. I'll Give It a Try*

This is the story of a guy, but the more I unwind it, the more you are going to hear about dolls. An old friend of mine, a guy named Damon Runyon, used to point out that oddity about my life, in the evenings when we perambulated around the late spots. And Runyon was a guy with peculiarly good perception in such matters.

Damon and I were friends a long, long time. I knew him for more years, I guess, than any of his other pals. I knew him all the way back to when I was a kid sports reporter on the *Tribune* in Providence and Damon was just beginning to hit the sports pages on the old *American* in New York.

I thought I was a pretty sharp guy in those days. Just ordinary narrative English didn't satisfy me when I wrote sports stories. Especially was this true when I wrote about baseball. I always invented my own, like a "grasscutter" for a hot ground ball or a "skyscraper to the pasture" for a fly ball to the outfield. It seemed to me like real slick talk.

Then one day I picked up a copy of the New York *American* and there was a fellow writing some of the same sort of stuff. I was confounded.

"A smart-aleck, big-city reporter, huh?" I was furious. The guy even had his by-line on the stuff. He called himself

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Damon Runyon. "Stealing my stuff, eh? I'll straighten him out, but quick!"

So I sat down and wrote a hot letter to this Runyon fellow. I asked why a big operator had to lift a small-town reporter's material without giving him credit. "Look," I said, "I'm only a little frog in this Providence, Rhode Island, but I originated some sports lingo my readers like and I don't want any of you big shots stealing it without telling where you got it."

I got a letter right back.

"I never heard of you, or of your lingo," replied Runyon. "You say I'm a big shot and you're a little frog. I just came here myself from Denver, Colorado, and Denver is smaller than Providence, I think."

That was around 1911, and it dates our first awareness of each other. Later, when I discovered Broadway, and vice versa, we became fast friends. Many's the time we sat around drinking coffee all night long in the old Lindy's, or, when conversation dragged, bounced around a few cabarets. By then, of course, I wasn't writing sports in Providence any longer. I was in show business.

"Y'know, Granny," Damon would say from time to time, "the more I know you, the more I find out about dolls on Broadway."

And I guess he did, because one summer I ran a cabaret on Forty-second Street, just off Broadway, and Damon was a regular customer. It was several weeks before I found out why. He was interested in one of the dolls in my show and he wound up marrying the girl.

But Runyon was right, and the way I look at it, it seems only natural that the story of a guy named Nils Thor Grannlund should be all about dolls. I've spent about forty-five years with them. It's that long that I've been in show business, as press agent, radio broadcaster, vaudeville impresario, and

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producer of night-club shows from Texas Guinan's blistering bistro to the Flamingo in Las Vegas. I was a talent scout for Flo Ziegfeld and I picked out a lot of his most beautiful girls. I was known as a "picker" in the heyday of the *Follies*. I also discovered a lot of the lovelies for Earl Carroll's *Vanities*. I even did a few turns in the movies. And girls were always the main part of the production, show girls and chorus girls and stars. I got to know a lot of big names, although they weren't big when I first knew them. Stars such as Barbara Stanwyck and Ethel Merman and Martha Raye and Sheree North were names no one knew when I met them. So you can understand my feeling of pride in their accomplishments and gratification that I had some small part in helping them get up there.

I don't mean by this to imply that I've been blind to the guys of the business. Along the way I had a bit to do about fellows such as Jimmy Durante and Ray Bolger and George Raft and Burt Lancaster, too.

But most of the girls in show business always seemed to me to have a harder time than any of the men. And the prettiest had the toughest climb. I've judged more beauty, and more beauty contests, I figure, than any other man alive. And the one thing I've found out about the pretties, from Joan Crawford to Gwen Verdon, is that they all needed help along the way. Most of them deserved it, too, because girls bucking show business are mostly nice kids with their eyes on the stars. They get into the maelstrom before they realize that the road to stardom is a whole lot rougher than it is in most other professions.

They need help to get off the floor when they're down or to save themselves from being pushed around when they're up. Sometimes they're broke and sometimes all they need is just a hand, like an introduction to the right person at the



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right time. It never was much for the giver to do, but it meant a lot to the girls. Sometimes, in the crazy Prohibition days when the gang lords romped, it was merely good advice they needed. It was the only time I hesitated to help. I found this frequently wasn't healthy for the adviser. The mobsters resented it. But often it was only a few kind words they needed when life looked as though it couldn't get any tougher.

I remember the time I found Sheree North sobbing her heart out. Sheree is famous in the movies now and known for dancing the hottest dance since Salome misplaced her veils, but she was just a chorus girl then. It wasn't enough that she had a child and a mother to support, but here it was only two weeks before Christmas and she was in the hospital. It took a lot of sympathy and the right words to get Sheree on her feet that time.

I got this big-brother attitude toward show girls way back when I first found out there was a show world outside of Providence. I got a job as press agent for the road tour of *Hanky Panky*, a spangled musical extravaganza, in 1912. The show was such a hit that it was brought back to Broadway for three separate runs and gave me my first real taste of show business. I also learned about show girls.

I was a skinny kid of eighteen then, and I didn't know too much about what was going on. At the first stop, in not-so-staid Boston, several of the girls, at one time or another, propositioned me to share quarters with them on the tour. Each one had the same reason—because it would cut down expenses. Salaries were so low—the girls got no more than \$25 a week—that they simply could not get along going it alone. To get by, everyone teamed up. Things were so tough that it was customary not only for the chorus girls but even the principals in the show to make some kind of a “traveling alliance.” If the team happened to be a girl and a boy, no



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one was horrified. Fortunately, for my present conscience, my press-agent work kept me running ahead of the show a considerable portion of the time, so I didn't get involved in any of these deals.

But *Hanky Panky* taught me how tough it is for the kids in show business. And after *Hanky Panky*, and after I got more experience in show business, I realized that there were a great many youngsters getting slapped in the face while they fought for the break they all were sure would come one day. I was usually in a spot, like running a night club or building shows for one, where I could do something. It was only natural, then, that one would tell another and it wasn't long before I had a reputation as a soft touch for the kids who needed it.

Damon, himself, couldn't have picked a more unlikely character to enter show business than I was in the beginning. The place where I started from and the downstage center where I landed are as far apart as, say, Lappland and the heart of Broadway. In fact, the contrast was precisely that, for Lappland, Swedish Lappland, is where I was born.

The exact spot where this questionably blessed event took place is just north of the Arctic Circle, near the tiny village of Korpilombolo. My mother was a strong peasant woman nearly six feet tall. My father was barely five feet tall, and weighed around a hundred and ten. He was the brains of the family and Mother did the heavy work. We lived in a huge house, a sort of baronial castle made of logs that belonged to my uncles. There were several of them, big, red-faced men, weathered by the harsh northland. They were traders, trading the Lapps needles and axes and red flannel for reindeer tallow and hides. I can still recall the awful smell of the latter as they piled up in the warehouse. My father, a studious, aristocratic man, was the bookkeeper for this remote post.

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Korpilombolo was (and still is) a predominantly Lapp community. When I was a child the Lapps lived all around us and I knew few other playmates besides the Lapp kids. Their dwellings were crude dirt and log hovels that served only as winter quarters. They were largely deserted during the summer, when the whole Lapp population went off on its annual trek.

Reindeer are the mainstay of Lapp economy, both as a source of food and as pack animals. Lapp activity, therefore, is geared to the habits of these hardy beasts. They subsist on the tough Arctic grasses that spring up when the snow melts and a coarse gray, branched lichen called reindeer moss. The latter grows as far north as the extreme limits of Arctic vegetation.

Thus, each spring, as soon as the snow began to melt, the huge reindeer herds would start moving north, grazing as they went. The whole village would follow. The women and the girls took care of the camp, cooked the food, and mended the clothes. The men and the boys herded the reindeer, and protected the herd from marauding wolves.

The spring when I was six, one of the Lapp leaders persuaded my mother to let me go with them on their annual trek. For three wonderful months we lived in reindeer-hide tents or in the open. Our diet was almost entirely some product from the reindeer, half-cooked meat, a pudding made from its blood, or a strong cheese made from its milk. I worked along with the Lapp kids, herding reindeer and making myself useful around the nomad camp. I must have been successful in this first employment, because every summer season after that for the next few years I went on the Lapp trek.

I was nine when my family migrated to the United States and settled in Providence, Rhode Island. We arrived in July,

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in the middle of what I recall as the hottest weather I had known up to that time. My father walked the streets for days looking for work and, finally, on the strength of his trading experience, he got a job as a bookkeeper at \$12 a week. That seemed like a lot of money to us at first, but we soon discovered it didn't go very far in the United States. Anything I could do to help the situation I knew would be appreciated.

There weren't many jobs for a nine-year-old in Providence that summer, but one day, soon after we arrived, our neighbors in the apartment above us entertained a visitor. He was a big, redheaded sailor, mate on the schooner *America*, which carried crude salt to Providence from Turks Islands in the British West Indies. The devil-may-care attitude of the big fellow fascinated me, and when he invited me to come along on his next voyage, my parents readily consented.

I thought I was to be a guest, a mere passenger on the big ship, but the mate had other ideas. I became the captain's cabin boy, and among other duties I regularly had to wash his underwear. The discipline was good for me though, and I learned to love the sea, and as long as I lived in Providence I continued to pick up an occasional buck for some service on the boats.

When I got around to entering school that first autumn in the United States, I didn't like it. My English was quite limited, so they put me in a class with children all smaller and younger than I. Added to this humiliation was the embarrassment of my strange clothes. Before we came to the United States I had been fitted out in a pair of crude leather shoes that were made by a Swedish leatherworker who hardly ever made footwear. They were the first leather shoes I'd ever owned. I had always worn wooden shoes, or the fur-lined boots of the Lapps.

I managed to live through school, but it was largely with



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the help of the old superintendent, Dr. Sawin. He took a fatherly interest in me from the beginning and I've never forgotten it. He not only helped me to learn English, but he provided a simple system of learning that helped me in my other studies. He said that with my limited knowledge of English it wasn't so necessary to learn exact dates and times and places as it was to acquire mental pictures of what I studied. These, he said, I would retain a lot longer than any exact information. It worked, too, and I remembered the Lapps in the old country. They had no written language, yet they were able to trek across hundreds of miles of northern wasteland by the aid of their mental pictures of landmarks, rivers, and plains.

Dr. Sawin's method worked so well that I was ready for high school by the time I was thirteen. Classical High in Providence was, at that time, considered a sort of college preparatory school and such studies as Greek and Latin were compulsory. I enjoyed Greek the more because again I found a good short cut to learning.

My father was still earning only \$12 a week so by this time I, too, was earning money and helping out at home. I got a double job carrying the *Evening Bulletin* and the *Morning Journal*. It meant getting up at four o'clock every morning, whatever the weather, to carry the *Journal* and working late every evening to deliver the *Bulletin*. My route extended all the way to what was then called South Providence, and I walked the entire route morning and evening.

On Saturdays I got additional work in the pressroom and on Sundays I helped deliver the newsstand Sunday edition. The Saturday job generally lasted all night. And for all this, seven days and a night, I earned five dollars and twenty cents. It was an important contribution to the family income.

Since I arose before anyone else in the household, Mother



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gave me a dime to buy breakfast. That's how I learned Greek.

There was a small Greek restaurant on my route operated by a man who had once been a professor in the University of Athens. I got into the habit of taking my Greek text along every morning and over breakfast the professor would coach me. It gave me a big advantage over the rest of the kids in my class.

Then one morning the Greek professor-café owner told me that a large number of his countrymen, recent immigrants to America, were anxious to learn English. He was teaching a few of them, he said, but he needed help. So we organized a Greek-English class in his restaurant every Sunday afternoon. The immigrants each paid fifty cents an hour for this instruction. My cut was around five dollars plus the additional practice with my Greek. Thus, as a fifteen-year-old, I was making almost as much as my father and going to school besides. And with the kind of outside help I was getting, school was a snap.

To this day I still enjoy talking Greek. In the days when I used to meet the late Charlie Skouras quite frequently I always greeted him with the Greek words for ordering a cup of coffee. I knew the three Skouras brothers, Charlie, Spyros, and George, back in the days when they were starting their extraordinary climb from bus boys in St. Louis to the top of the theatrical world. But that was a few years later, after I also had begun to make my way in show business.

My first inoculation with show business didn't "take." It happened while I was still in Classical High. The teacher who coached the drama class thought I had a flair for Shakespeare. She was probably persuaded by my ability to memorize long passages. She never took into consideration my figure.

"I want you to play Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*," she said. "It's a part you can do well."

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Then she saw me in tights. I was the skinniest kid in school. I was definitely not the type for tights. She was appalled. So was I.

"Perhaps you'd better play Shylock," she hedged.

I agreed. "I guess so," I said. Shylock wore a long coat.

My love at this time was nearly anything that had to do with sails and the sea. Narragansett Bay at that time boasted twenty-three yacht clubs, and I became known as a pretty good racing sailor. The famed Herreshoff Works were near our house and I got in a lot of spare-time employment around these famous yards. Uncle Nat of the Herreshoff clan was the blind genius who built America's *Cup* defenders in their famous battles with Sir Thomas Lipton's *Shamrocks*. I raced with and against the Herreshoffs and I acquired a knowledge of seamanship and ships that gave me a lot of extra fun and extra money during my late teens. It also gave me many adventures.

One summer a yachting acquaintance of mine bought a racy eighteen-footer called the *Nutmeg*, in Marblehead, and hired me and a crew of two boys and salty old Ned Halton, already more than seventy, to sail her around Cape Cod to Providence.

The slim little cockleshell was strictly a racing boat, designed for smooth waters, and in no sense suitable for the dangerous seas of the open Atlantic. The voyage took nine days and we had food and money for two days. If it had not been for a big Portuguese fishing boat and her captain, Joe Silva, I probably wouldn't be telling this story.

We hailed the *Louisa Silva* in Provincetown Harbor and asked Joe if we could come aboard and look around. "Mighty trim ship you got there, Captain," we said admiringly. However, we were only partly inspired by admiration of the vessel. We had timed our visit to coincide with dinner call.

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I'm not sure whether Joe Silva's generosity was prompted by pity for a bunch of hungry mariners or admiration for our feat in sailing the frail vessel in the rugged waters around the Cape. He shook his head as he looked at it, as if to say he thought us slightly daft to try it. But he must have liked crazy sailors, for when we left he said he would be happy to have us make a voyage with him any time.

A month later a streetcar accident in Providence left me with a shattered pelvic bone. After three weeks in the hospital, I came out skinnier than ever, weak and shaky and in need of recuperation. I remembered the gruff Portuguese skipper and wrote him. He wrote back and told me to pick up his ship in Boston.

There the *Louisa Silva* traded her cargo of cod and hake and haddock for one frail sixteen-year-old boy and headed out to the Georges Banks. The crew, mostly Cape Verde Islanders, spoke only Portuguese, and since languages had always fascinated me, I thought this a good opportunity to pick up a little of their tongue.

My method was to repeat as nearly as I could word for word as they spoke. One of the sailors, apparently misunderstanding my intentions, took offense when I repeated everything he said. He came at me with a knife, but I ducked. I knew I was no match for this tough seaman, so I ran. Up the ratlines, through the rigging, and down the lines to the deck again, I ran with him at my heels all the way. He chased me until I was out of breath and there was nothing to do but stand and face him. I grabbed a belaying pin from the rail and swung.

My first blow took off part of one ear and the blood spurted. That stopped him long enough for Captain Silva to explain that I was only trying to learn Portuguese, that I meant no insult in repeating what he said.



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He was mollified at once, either by the sight of the blood or the captain's explanation, or both. I took him below and washed and patched his torn ear and from then on we were bosom friends. I picked up a smattering of Portuguese and he learned a little English, and between us we conducted the religious services on Sundays. These were held before the inevitable shrine, a crude lithograph of the Madonna, with a candle kept perpetually burning in front of it. I had taught Sunday-school ashore, so this was not a new thing to me.

We returned to Boston a few weeks later, laden with fish and health. At least I was well and whole again. I always did feel that I should have paid Joe Silva for letting me make the trip. Instead, he paid me regular crew pay. It was things like this that kind of set a pattern in my life so that when the time came and I was the one who could give the favor I never hesitated. I felt I was just paying back guys such as Joe Silva and the Greek and Dr. Sawin.

I was still delivering papers near the end of my last year in high school when I got a call from John R. Rathom, managing editor of the *Journal-Bulletin* papers. Rathom, a legendary great of New England journalism, for some reason I'll never know had taken an interest in me. He told me that when I graduated from high school, he was going to put me on the *Providence Tribune* as a reporter.

The offer was a mixed blessing to me then. I wanted the promotion, but the *Tribune* was a new sheet, it had none of the prestige of the solid old *Journal and Bulletin*. I had entertained visions of becoming a star on the staff of the latter. Mr. Rathom patiently pointed out that the chances for advancement on the *Journal* or the *Bulletin* were pretty slim. One had to wait until someone died, almost, to advance on either staff. On the other hand, the new paper afforded advancement to any position.



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I was heartbroken, but I took his advice and went to work for the *Tribune*, and before long I had become a sort of triple-duty man, a combination sports reporter, drama editor, and police reporter. I also covered yachting and motorcycle events and wrote automobile news, although there wasn't much of the latter in 1910. But the work gave me a lot of good contacts that enabled me to pick up an easy buck in other pursuits. I drove race horses on the ice and I sailed an occasional yacht race. I got as much as \$50 for an afternoon of the latter. I was the official scorer of the local baseball club. I did some automobile racing; I once drove against Ralph De Palma and Barney Oldfield at a dirt horse track near Providence. And a few lucky breaks right at the beginning of my newspaper career gave me a reputation as a scoop reporter that I never lived down. It began with Senator Aldrich.

Nelson W. Aldrich, wealthy senator from Rhode Island, wielded tremendous power in the United States Senate. His home was in Warwick, not far from the little cottage where I lived with my parents on the beach at Longmeadow. But the Aldrich home was a huge castle, surrounded by a high brick wall and guarded by a whole platoon of servants.

The city editor on the *Tribune*, a chap by the name of Eastman, liked to rib me. I was so serious about this newspaper business he decided that I ought to have a few lessons that would jolt some of it out of me. One day he told me Senator Aldrich was holding a secret political meeting in a private dining room in Providence and had barred all newspapermen. "If you really want to make a name for yourself," said Eastman, "cover that meeting." He knew I had about as much chance of getting into the meeting as a snowball in July.

I knew only three things: Where the meeting was being

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held; newspapermen were not allowed; and I was on my own. I went to the rear entrance and spoke to the caterer, whom I happened to know. He put me on as a waiter and the next hour was pure torture. I was a skinny kid in my teens and the trays were huge and piled high with food and dishes.

But I managed somehow, and I heard snatches and phrases (which I wrote down the moment I got out of the room) and when the luncheon was over and they settled down to real talk, I found a secluded vantage point from which, by lying on my stomach, I could see and hear all that went on in the room. I didn't know anything about politics, or even half of what was said, but I wrote it all down just to be sure I got the story. When I turned it in to Eastman, who really was a nice sort of guy, he was flabbergasted and pleased.

A few days later, however, he thought he had me again. Prince Wilhelm of Sweden, then about seventeen, was paying an official visit to America on the battleship *Fylgia*. All the socialites vied for his attention, and he was being given a big party at the home of one of them, the mansion of Mrs. Ogden Goelet in Newport.

"Look," said Eastman, a twinkle in his eye, "you're a Swede, and this Prince is about your own age. Go down to Newport and get an interview with him." Several regular reporters were standing around with grins on their faces when I solemnly accepted the assignment. Eastman magnanimously handed me two dollars for expenses.

With a high heart I took the electric train thirty miles to Newport, for I didn't know I was attempting the impossible. I arrived to find I couldn't even get by the massive iron gates of the Goelet estate, let alone get into the mansion and interview the Prince.

I wandered back to the town of Newport where I discovered that a Swedish ball was in progress. The dance was in

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honor of the Prince's visit, but it was for the servants and working people of the town. With my looks and my accent I had no trouble getting in, and then, to my great delight and the surprise of the crowd, the young Prince himself put in an appearance. The Swedish servant girls in the crowd went nuts.

I went up to the Prince and told him in Swedish I had come to get a story but hadn't been permitted past the gates of the Goelet estate. He said he had been at the Goelet reception when he heard about the ball and had insisted on dropping in. As we talked, one of the girls dancing by me said, "Will you dance with me, Prince Wilhelm?"

The young Prince said he sure would, and immediately whirled off with her. I was a pretty dumb Swede, but not so dumb that I didn't see a story in this. I grabbed the first train back to Providence and although I got in quite late, my story appeared in the next edition. The headlines said something about "Prince abandons society reception to dance with servant girl." I was a hot kid reporter.

A few days later Eastman nailed me again, only this time it wasn't a rib. "The Prince of Sweden will be the guest of Senator Nelson W. Aldrich at a formal dinner at his home in Warwick. The place is guarded, but you live near there, you might be able to get in. Give it a try."

I found a break in the wall around the estate and climbed through only to be grabbed immediately by three guards. But one of them spoke with a Swedish accent, I noticed, and I put up quite a case for myself. They finally took me to the kitchen for safekeeping while they continued on their rounds. But the kitchen staff was nearly all Swedish, too, so I got along all right and managed to stuff my stomach on good Swedish cooking besides.

Meanwhile, they had gone to inform someone in authority



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about me, when young Winthrop Aldrich came in. I attempted to give him a story about my representing the Swedes of Newport who, I said, wanted to give a dinner for the Prince. He recognized my story as a phony, of course, but he smiled and told me gently but firmly that newspaper people were not allowed there that night. Just then, down the long hall, I saw Wilhelm, and I called to him in Swedish. He turned and came up to us and greeted me warmly. I'll never forget the expression on young Aldrich's face.

The Prince and I chatted for a moment, and then he asked me how I was going to get back to Providence that night, since the electric tram had stopped by this time. When I told him I didn't know, he invited me to drive back with him.

Years later, during a big charity campaign in 1920, I met Winthrop Aldrich in New York. I asked him if he remembered the time the fresh kid newspaper reporter invaded his father's estate. He sure did, he said, and we had a laugh over the incident.

By the time the Prince dropped me off in front of the *Tribune* office in Providence, I was hungry again so I went into a small beanery next door. I ordered fifteen cents' worth of beans and bread and was calmly working my way through this when Eastman and a couple of reporters came in. They gave me a big smile.

"How's the big city reporter?" they greeted me. "Did you get your story?"

I grinned right back, enjoying the moment. "Of course," I said. "I had a nice interview with the Prince and he brought me back to town. He dropped me off here only a moment ago."

That was the end of the beans. They yanked me into the office and sat me down at a typewriter and as fast as I could peck out the story they fed it to the typesetter. Furthermore,

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Eastman queried other papers around the country and we sold the story to enough to net me several hundred dollars out of it.

Years later, when I was director of publicity for Loew's, Inc., a tall, cadaverous-looking man walked into my office. "I am Prince Wilhelm of Sweden," he announced. "Do you remember me?"

He came to see us about some motion-picture film he had shot on a hunting expedition in Africa, but when I took him in to Mr. Loew's office and introduced him as the Prince of Sweden, Loew wouldn't believe me. And you couldn't blame him. Around the circuit at that time we had created a whole family of screwball royalty, all imaginary, and in a spirit of fun. (Bunny Granville, the Ziegfeld star and father of Bonita Granville of movie fame, was one of the prime instigators of this farce.) So Loew thought I was merely pulling his leg, producing in the flesh one of our imaginary characters.

There was one other notable scoop, but that is a story that should be told later.

My job as drama editor on the *Tribune* was the one I was keenest about. I was a little goggle-eyed when I interviewed the big stars that came to town. As a kid of seventeen, I got a tremendous kick every time I went backstage to talk to such stars as Fred Stone and Dave Montgomery and Cecil Spooner. It was a dream world for me then.

I recall sitting in Pat Rooney's dressing room at the Keith-Albee Theatre in Providence one afternoon when Pat was alone. Pat and Marion Bent had been a headline act for years, but Pat was alone on this tour, because Marion was at home having a baby. While I watched him make up for the Saturday matinee, a telegram arrived. He opened it and

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shouted, "My God! I'm the father of a son!" The son was Pat Rooney, Jr., later known to millions.

I was always treated with deference by everyone from the stars to the end girls in the chorus line. Being a drama editor, even in Providence, even on the *Tribune*, made me a big shot where show business was concerned. It was heady atmosphere for a young sprout so it is no wonder I was soon and forever after infatuated with show business. I have often wondered what my fate would have been had I remained with the *Tribune*. Perhaps I might have become its managing editor, but if that were my prospects for the future I couldn't see it in 1910. While I was still on the *Tribune*, Colonel Felix Wendelschaefer hired me as press agent for the Providence Opera House at \$10 a week. This, added to my salary on the paper, gave me a pretty handsome income and a pretty handsome opinion of myself.

The atmosphere around the Opera House was even more exhilarating than I had found as a mere reporter on the outside looking in, for now I was a part of the backstage life. The Colonel was a wealthy man, and the Opera House the finest legitimate theater in town. It booked all the big-time acts such as Weber and Fields, Williams and Walker, Montgomery and Stone, E. H. Sothorn and Julia Marlowe, and all the important plays. Gradually, all my other activities and interests began to be pushed aside. Even my sports reporting, which I always enjoyed, was neglected when there was dramatic news (or publicity) to write.

In October, 1910, as sports reporter for the *Tribune*, I went to New Haven with the Brown University football team. Brown beat Yale 21-0 in a startling upset, startling because that score (or something close to it) had been reversed ever since anyone could remember. And this was the Yale team that included the great All-American (two years, 1909 and



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1910) John R. Kirkpatrick. He's General Kirkpatrick now, president of Madison Square Garden Corporation. The game made a big impression on me.

But there is also another memory of New Haven that remains vivid in my mind. I saw a show at the Taft Theatre the night before and I could describe every act, every number in the show. Although I was destined to become more familiar with that show and its people, I still remember it as it was the first time I saw it. It was a musical comedy and it was called *Hanky Panky*. It was the funniest and most entertaining show I had ever seen. Though I was young and impressionable and easily entertained, as I look back through the film of forty-five years and many other great shows, I realize that *Hanky Panky*, even by modern standards, would still be a pretty good show. Few stage productions of today can compare with the extravaganzas of those days. Production costs today are such that it would be virtually impossible as well as unprofitable to put on such a show.

Florence Moore and her husband, Billy Montgomery, were the comedy principals, and by any standard it would be called a hit show. I was especially intrigued with the acting of this comedy team. Florence Moore was one of the very few really pretty funny girls I've known. In *Hanky Panky*, she and Billy did a unique switch on the usual comedy line. Billy played the undersized, somewhat half-witted dupe; Florence was the overbearing, smart, insulting partner. In most "two acts" or comedy teams there is this same straight man and comic setup. The unique feature of this one was that the smart one, whose job it was to insult and take advantage of the weak and stupid partner, was a pretty girl.

The memory and the pleasant impressions of that show stayed with me for weeks. It was a high point in the life of a stage-struck kid. The thrill of it was still warm inside me

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when Colonel Wendelschaefer called me in one morning to write the publicity for his next booking.

"Granny," he said, "I've got *Hanky Panky* lined up for the week before New Year's. Now, here's what—"

"Wonderfull!" I exclaimed, interrupting him.

"Have you seen it?" asked the Colonel, surprised at my enthusiasm.

"I saw it in New Haven a few weeks ago," I said. "And if they've still got Florence Moore in it, you've booked a real hit."

"She'll be in it," said the Colonel. "Now see what you can do with the story."

That's all the instructions he gave me. And I didn't need any more. I "went to town" on that one.

In addition to the Opera House, Colonel Wendelschaefer also owned the Narragansett Hotel, which at that time adjoined the theater. It was a large, old New England institution with a huge dining room and the New Year's business, and business of similar celebrations, was as important to the Colonel as his theater. But by Christmas it was pretty obvious that reservations in the dining room were far below normal. The Colonel was worried.

"Granny," he said, "you've done a good job on *Hanky Panky*, what could you do for the hotel?"

I was too young to know caution and too inexperienced to know better so I blurted out the first idea that came into my head. "Why don't you have a midnight show of *Hanky Panky*?" I said. "It could begin at 1 A.M., after supper in the dining room. And you could boost the dining-room business by having the cast make an appearance in there before the show."

So far as I know there had never been a midnight New Year's Eve show before. The Colonel was listening, and I

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could see my idea was landing on receptive ears. "And think of the publicity I could give it," I continued.

"You've got yourself a job, son," he said. "Now, skiddoo!"

We sold out the huge dining room and the midnight show that followed and, so far as Providence was concerned, history was made in the entertainment world.

Soon after the first of the year I got another call from Colonel Wendelschaefer. "Granny," he said, when I stepped into his office, "meet Marcus Loew. He is the owner of *Hanky Panky*. He also owns about a dozen theaters in New York."

I was impressed, but not by the dozen theaters, or the man's name, for I was totally unfamiliar with both. But he was the owner of my favorite show, and for that I was honored. I thought, too, that the Colonel had called me in so that Mr. Loew could meet the publicity agent who had done so much to make the Providence engagement a success. It was more than that.

"Mr. Loew thinks you've done a great job on his show and he wants you to work for him."

Well, I hadn't heard of Marcus Loew or his New York theaters (as a matter of fact, they weren't much more than a string of broken-down small-time vaudeville houses or jerky one-reel picture shows at that time), but I did know what I was. I was a pretty important frog in the little puddle of Providence. I was practically the whole sports and drama department of my paper, press agent of the Opera House, and a friend of some of the wealthiest yachtsmen in New England. Furthermore, I was averaging about twenty-five or thirty dollars a week from all my activities and that was good dough for a youngster still in his teens.

"I don't know," I said, and I guess the tone of my voice and the look on my face showed I was pretty doubtful of the offer. Besides, Marcus Loew was then, as he always was.



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about the most insignificant-looking little guy one could imagine. He was about five feet three, and the only thing about him that had any sparkle at all was a mouthful of gold teeth. His whole attitude was one of humility and apology. By contrast, I was about as overbearing and obnoxious as anyone could be.

The little man finally convinced me, though, that he did own some theaters and did own *Hanky Panky*. I found out later that he had acquired the show more or less by accident. It was tossed in in a deal he had made shortly before with William Morris, the international booking agent. The show was on the road and Loew figured he might as well continue touring it. It turned out to be one of the best money-makers he ever owned.

"I like what you did for the show," he said. "And I would like for you to go on the road with it. When it's had its run, I'll find a place for you in New York."

"It's a good opportunity, Granny, I think you ought to take it," the Colonel advised.

Mr. Loew said the next few weeks' schedule called for engagements in Boston, Rochester, and Buffalo, and since I had been in these towns covering sports events (traveling with professional baseball teams in what was then known as the Eastern League, now the International), I thought, what the heck! I'll try it. It'll give me a chance to look up old friends, and being the agent for a hit show won't hurt my reputation any.

I asked Bill Dwyer, a nice guy who was managing editor of the *Tribune*, if he'd give me a month's vacation. I figured that's all I'd want.

"I'll be glad to let you go, Granny. You've earned the vacation, but you won't be back. You like show business and you'll probably make a go of it. But if you should ever get

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tired of it and want to go back to newspaper work, get in touch with me."

Bill Dwyer was right. I was in love with show business. But it wasn't an adolescent love. It was an infatuation that lasted a lifetime. The one-month tour stretched out to more than half a year, and eventually a career. The *Hanky Panky* jaunt to Boston and Buffalo continued clear across the United States, with a successful detour into Canada, and finally settled down on Broadway. And I've been in show business ever since, ever since that day early in January, 1912, when I told Marcus Loew, "O.K., Mr. Loew, I'll give it a try."

## 2

### *I Hit Broadway Thumping the Tub*

I learned nearly everything I know about show business in that first experience with *Hanky Panky*. I knew the taste of success a hit show can give every member of its troupe, and I knew the heartache and disillusion one can suffer in the business, too. The Moore and Montgomery team gave me a taste of both.

I have never known a love such as Florence Moore held for her comedy partner and spouse. Florence had a glamorous figure, and she was one of the most beautiful dark-haired, dark-eyed women I ever knew. Billy Montgomery was her opposite in every way. He was not handsome; he weighed only about a hundred and thirty pounds; and his love was about as constant as the moon. No one in show business understood how he could have such influence on Florence.

When the tour hit San Francisco, one of the girls in the chorus quietly dropped out and word soon got around that she had to have an illegal operation. I had gone on ahead of the troupe, but when I came back a few days later, everyone in the cast looked at me with accusing eyes. The gossip had been started by someone in the troupe that I was the guilty male. I had an idea who the guilty party was, but I had no way of proving it. My reputation and my career seemed headed for the rocks, and there was nothing I could do about



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it. I was pretty sure Billy was to blame, for I knew he had been dating the girl secretly, but the gossip had gone too far for my word alone to mean anything. Besides, I had such admiration for Florence that I would do nothing that would hurt her. I was a social outcast as far as the cast was concerned, and everyone from the top stars down to the lowliest chorus girl openly snubbed me. It was a pretty difficult thing for a sensitive youngster to take. I was glad when I had to go ahead on the road again.

A few weeks later, when I again returned to the show, the unfortunate girl was back in the chorus line and there was a whole new feeling in evidence toward me. I was not long in hearing the reason. The girl herself had set everything right by openly accusing Billy.

Despite this, and many subsequent and similar escapades on the part of her errant husband, Florence remained true and steadfast in her love for him. She became famous in show business. For the next fifteen years she scored in a spectacular series of top hits on Broadway: *Parlor, Bedroom and Bath*, *The Music Box Review*, *She Couldn't Say No*, *Artists and Models*, while Montgomery, meantime, heaped degradation on her. Nevertheless, Florence stuck to him until he finally plummeted down the ladder of fame and disappeared.

There were no books, no schools, no one who could teach me how to be a press agent when I began with *Hanky Panky*. In 1912 even the term "press agent" was new. It was to go through many unpopular metamorphoses before it became "publicity agent" and through the crucible of public opinion before it became "public relations." I had to learn, like everyone else, by the simple process of trying everything and anything that would get a notice in the press. Any success I had was the success of ignorance. And since the show set a remarkable record for weird stunts that clicked, all I can say is that

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a fool was successful where a wiser man might have been afraid to try. The things I did were the kind of capers press agents (excuse me, public-relations directors) would not dare to attempt today.

The girls of the show cooperated eagerly with any idea where their appearance might help. Even to going to jail. Yes, *Hanky Panky* probably still holds the record for being the only show where the entire chorus of twenty-four girls went to the poky on both coasts!

It began on the cross-country trip when I promised the girls I'd give them all a chance to bathe in the Pacific Ocean. They reminded me of the promise when we opened at the Mason Opera House in Los Angeles. True to my word, I rounded up about a dozen automobiles and we took off for the beach at Venice. Naturally, a couple of the cars were filled with reporters and cameramen.

In those days a girl's proper bathing costume consisted of long stockings, bloomers that reached below the knee, a sleeved blouse, and high laced shoes. It was less abbreviated than some of the costumes they wore on stage, and it was something that none of them had bothered to bring on tour. We solved the problem by renting twenty-four men's bathing suits, the only thing available at the bathhouse in Venice.

Men's swim suits (and "suits" they were) had a short skirt over trunks extending halfway to the knees and a sleeveless shirt. By today's standards it would be ample coverage for the female figure. By 1912 standards it was scandalous.

The girls entered into the spirit of the escapade with glee and a few moments later they were cavorting on the sands and splashing in the warm surf of the Pacific. But not for long! Suddenly there was a whole army of policemen (tipped off by you know who!) and the girls were rounded up and carted off in the Venice paddy wagon.

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The reporters and cameramen went to work then and in a few moments the jailhouse was filled with the smoke from their flash guns. The smoke brought tears to the girls' eyes, and this, too, made good picture material. "Chorus girls sob when arrested for bathing," read the headlines later. But the smoke also made them cough, and before long there was such pandemonium in the little jail that they had to let the girls out before they choked to death.

What a fine bunch of kids they were. They forgave me for all the trouble I had caused them, especially when they saw the splurge of publicity, with photographs, in all the Los Angeles papers. And business? Our engagement was extended for two weeks on the strength of that stunt alone.

We duplicated the stunt in Atlantic City later, and added a few frills for good measure. We had picked up a couple of cute bear cubs in Medford, Oregon, and a tall, lanky mountaineer to take care of them. We called the cubs Hanky and Panky and their trainer Lanky, and used them in publicity stunts clear across the country. In Atlantic City we had Helen Moyer, one of our most beautiful girls, parade the cubs on the boardwalk.

Atlantic City was the last stop on our tour before returning to New York and we were running out of new stunts for publicity. In fact, the presence of a musical named *Hanky Panky* at the Globe Theatre in Atlantic City threatened to become the best-kept secret of the beach metropolis. In addition, Marcus Loew had come down to preview the show before it went to New York. I had visions of myself slinking back to Providence and begging for my old job on the *Tribune*. Then I figured, what the heck? If the public in Los Angeles would respond to the swimming escapade stunt, then the only thing different about Atlantic City was the water. But just to make sure, I added the cubs and Helen Moyer. It



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worked, and a couple of weeks later we landed on Broadway.

But Broadway in those days was in no way what it is today. It was a high-class street then. The hot-dog stand had not yet been invented, and the motif was generally subdued, although a form of early-day clip joint (the first cabarets) was already in operation.

This was the Broadway George M. Cohan sang about ("Remember me to Herald Square" and to "the boys on Forty-second Street"). Centering around Thirty-fourth Street, Herald Square was the heart of whatever lighted area there was, and there wasn't much. Macy's Department Store was already there, but it was just a store then, and the entire emporium could have been fitted into the men's furnishings of today's giant store.

The strip of theater life went from there up to about Fiftieth Street, but the theaters were confined mostly between Thirty-fourth and Forty-second Streets. Actually, show business was only timidly starting to cross the great divide north of Forty-second Street.

There were few lights and practically no signs of any size. Broadway was a dark street when the sun went down. It wasn't until a couple of years later that the first 1,000-watt bulb was hung on the main stem. I claim to be the one who hung it. I hung eight of them over the ancient New York Theatre when Loew took it over as a ten-cent movie house. They lit all of Broadway, or so it seemed to me then.

The Times Building and the Astor and Claridge hotels dominated Times Square. The Claridge, of course, has long since disappeared. Besides these there were no other big buildings. Social activity was centered in the Astor and the Claridge, almost facing each other across Broadway.

The people of show business (those in it who could afford to) made the Astor's Hunting Room and Claridge's main

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dining room their headquarters, much as Sardi's and the Colony are today. Flo Ziegfeld, George M. Cohan, William A. Brady, and David Belasco were to be found at the Claridge nearly every day. Across the street, in the Astor's Hunting Room, the important representatives of the newly budding motion-picture industry congregated. There Marcus Loew, Nicholas and Joe Schenck, William Fox, W. R. Sheehan, and the Warner brothers met and dined and talked shop. I never felt I had really arrived in show business until the day Joe Schenck invited me to lunch with him in the Hunting Room.

Close by was another old landmark that is seldom mentioned in the histories of Times Square, because few old-timers will admit they knew it. In its day it was called Bartholdi Inn, and, in its small way, it was quite as famous as the Astor or the Claridge. Although the building was on Broadway, its entrance was on a side street, just off the main thoroughfare. The Bartholdi was a rendezvous for actors and chorus girls out of work, and another kind of lady who was never out of work.

At the top of a wide staircase leading up from the street sat Mama Bartholdi, slightly mustachioed, squat and overweight, with a heart to match her size. Mama collected a dollar a night from any visitor who strayed to the top of the stairs—if they had the dollar. If they were actors and out of work, and Mama knew they were trying, she never asked for the buck. She knew she'd collect when they got a break.

I knew of the place, as everyone on Broadway did, but I never had had occasion to meet Mama Bartholdi or stay overnight in the Inn, until one time when I had to catch an early train to Boston and decided for convenience' sake to spend the night there.

Mama Bartholdi looked up in surprise when I approached with my suitcase. Practically no one who came to the Bar-

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tholdi Inn ever carried a suitcase. She gave me a key to a room, and I went down the long hall and found it myself. Ten minutes later there was a knock on the door. I opened it, and there stood a girl as pretty as anything you ever saw in a chorus.

There must be a million gags on this line and I'm sure you've heard most of them, at least Jimmy Durante's oft-repeated one: "I'm in a hotel room, and there's a knock on the door, and a voice says, 'This is the house detective; you got a woman in your room?' And I says 'No,' so he t'rows one in." There was, inevitably, a knock on the door at Bartholdi Inn, and no house detective. I was still pretty young the night I stopped at Bartholdi Inn, so my answer to the girl at the door was too naïve to be turned into a gag.

"I'm sorry," I said, "but I've got to catch a train." It was the best reply I could think of.

Bartholdi Inn was already old on Broadway when I hit town, and no one ever remembered a time when it wasn't there. It remained and flourished in its own peculiar way for several more years, until Loew's State Theatre replaced it about World War I.

There were not many big cafés on Broadway in those days and the few night spots in town were, for the most part, little more than houses of prostitution. One of the exceptions was Considine's Cabaret, at Forty-second Street opposite the Times Building. Mae Murray once danced in Considine's. Shanley's Restaurant, very well known in its day, occupied the street floor of the edifice at Forty-fourth Street, where the Paramount Theatre Building stands today. Shanley's had no girl show, just an occasional act and some dancing numbers, but it did have good food.

The situation on the side streets was about the same. Only a few were high class. Still remembered were the Normandie



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and the Café l'Opéra. Most of the places on the side streets and on Broadway itself were dives, saloons, joints. No decent girl would work in them, if she could help it.

Sophie Tucker told me once how she had sung in one of these dives called the German Village, a cabaret on Fortieth Street just off Broadway. It was in her early days, when pickings were slim and hard to get. The place was one of those where the girls "worked" the tables, to drum up liquor and upstairs trade. Big-hearted Sophie soon became the confidante of all the girls, who complained their pimps took all their money. Sophie arranged to meet them in the ladies' room frequently during the evening and held their money for them until they could slip it away sometime when their boy friends weren't around.

On Fiftieth Street, which was considered way uptown in those days, there was a place called the Winter Garden Cabaret. It was across the street from the Winter Garden, and much of its trade came from there. It, too, was a combination night club and bordello. They had dancing girls and girls who did song numbers, but they all had to be prostitutes.

When I first saw Broadway, the cabarets on it were hardly the kind to inspire or uplift. They were not places for Mr. John Q. Public and his wife. And if John chose to go alone, he was likely to get clipped, for they were strictly sucker traps.

When society folk went out in those days they sought night entertainment only infrequently, except, perhaps, for some place that had an orchestra. There were Rector's and Bustanoboy's and Delmonico's. Only the wealthy and high society patronized these spots. Rector's and Bustanoboy's were hard by Broadway. Delmonico's was on Fifth Avenue, and its devotees felt themselves a cut above the Broadway crowd.

Rector's, at Forty-eighth and Broadway, had music and dancing, but no acts, and prices were high. Some of the

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people who started going to Delmonico's, like Diamond Jim Brady and Lillian Russell, drifted over to Rector's in later years. The main room facing Broadway was directly on the ground floor. As its fame spread and business grew, a second-floor dining room was opened. If the main room was filled, or if the headwaiter decided the customer didn't appear to be high class enough, he might be shunted to this overflow room. This same social stratification even extended to Rector's two bands. The Park Avenue clientele considered the upstairs band *déclassé* compared to the music on the ground floor.

But the upstairs band had a style all its own, and its leader had a personality that the customers liked, and it wasn't long before everyone preferred to climb the stairs at Rector's. The band leader was Ted Lewis.

After the theater people went out to supper at places like this, for they were primarily eating places, not night clubs. About the only exception to this was Reisenweber's just off Columbus Circle on Eighth Avenue. It had four floors, with different entertainment on each floor. Sophie Tucker and her band held forth for years on the second floor. Doraldina, an amazingly successful Hawaiian dancer, was on the third floor for a long time. And Betty Fox and a newcomer in show business named Rudolph Valentino did a dance number on the top floor. The whole idea of this combination—high-class entertainment and good food—was originated by John Steinberg, who operated the establishment. He was one of the pioneers in the night-club business. (Today he is the general manager of the fashionable Hillcrest Country Club near Los Angeles.)

Sophie Tucker's domain was called the Jazz Room, and this is where the cover charge was originated. Steinberg set up a fifty-cent-per-person charge "to keep out the bums."

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Sophie had an attractive seventeen-year-old redheaded violinist whom she featured by sitting him on a piano. He later became a band leader and an amateur magician. His name was Richard Himber.

The pianist in the Doraldina Room was a child musical prodigy aged about fourteen. Show business knows him today as Al Newman, director of musical arrangements and orchestras for Twentieth Century-Fox.

Ziegfeld had one of the few spots that provided night entertainment. There were two broken-down theaters, the New York and the Criterion, adjoining in one block-long archaic building between Forty-fourth and Forty-fifth streets in the heart of Times Square. There, about 1909, Ziegfeld leased the entire adjoined upper floor as a roof garden, and here the *Follies* was born. He opened with Anna Held.

Ziegfeld's roof, however, was only a summer place, since it wasn't heated. But the *Follies* idea was popular, and just about the time I reached Broadway, Ziegfeld had leased the elaborate Amsterdam Theatre on Forty-second Street, and here his *Follies* became an institution.

This, briefly, then, was the Broadway I first saw. Show business was its principal industry, and I loved everything about show business. Besides, I had just completed a pretty good record of press agency for a road show and now I had to sell it to Broadway. No one could have jumped into it with more confidence than I had at that time. *Hanky Panky* opened at the Broadway Theatre in New York on August 5, 1912. It ran for 104 performances.

But by this time Loew was urging me to take on his string of small-time vaudeville theaters and I was undecided whether to accept. I was looking for bigger things and hoping I might get an offer from the Shuberts. I had gotten the tip that



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there might be a place for me with the Shuberts while I was still on the road with *Hanky Panky*.

The great Raymond Hitchcock, who soared through the theatrical heavens for a quarter century, was playing in a Shubert production in San Francisco when I landed there a few days ahead of my show. One day Hitchcock was the guest of honor at a luncheon, and it seemed an excellent place for me to barge right in and start selling tickets to *Hanky Panky*.

Hitchcock saw me crawling among the tables. "Now," he laughed, "this is a real switch. A luncheon for a Shubert production, and Loew's show selling tickets."

It was a good publicity stunt for *Hanky Panky*, but Toxen Worm, Shubert's widely known press agent, wasn't pleased. He was impressed, though, and once he got me outside he said, "That wasn't a bad stunt, young fellow, but why don't you go to work for us? When you get back to New York, go see Lee Shubert and tell him I sent you."

The Shuberts then, and for almost forty years thereafter, were the dominant producers of legitimate shows, dramas, and musicals. They also owned practically all the "legit" theaters on Broadway, as well as the rest of the country. The Loew theaters, on the other hand, were about eleven in number, and were for the most part old, abandoned houses which Loew had leased for a song and refurbished. Only three of them were new and played vaudeville. The rest were little more than stores, nickelodeons we called them then, that showed one- and two-reel pictures. This was the small beginning of what later became the mighty Loew's Circuit and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Only no one knew it then.

So when I hit New York there was the star-studded name of the Shuberts—Lee and Jake—on the one side and a pretty

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sure thing in little, unobtrusive, second-rate Marcus Loew on the other. I went to see Lee Shubert.

But I was pretty cocky. The success of the *Hanky Panky* tour, on top of my small success in Providence, had puffed up my ego tremendously. I waited in the outer room of Shubert's office while five impatient minutes ticked off, then another, and another and another, and when ten minutes passed and still they didn't summon me, I felt insulted. "Why should a big guy like me wait around for anybody?" I asked myself. "I'm more important than that."

I walked out, strolled the few blocks over to Loew's ramshackle office, and walked right in.

"I'll give you \$75 a week," he said.

So I hit Broadway thumping the tub for this little man with the sparkling gold teeth and his string of insignificant movie houses and small-time vaudeville theaters. It was the best move I ever made. Furthermore, I soon became devoted to this wonderful guy, Marcus Loew. It was a devotion that was to last for the rest of his life and his death was my biggest heartbreak.

# 3

## *Just Probe Around a While*

Broadway is undoubtedly the world's greatest ego-deflating gimmick ever invented. Anyone who has tried to crack it knows the truth of that statement. Every young hopeful who arrives in town with the idea that Broadway is just another Frisco or Minneapolis or Kansas City (or Providence!), only bigger, is headed for quick disillusion. Broadway is like all these other places only bigger, and it is made up of people from all over, but there is something else besides size involved in the pattern that is Broadway. It is soft in spots, when you get to know it, but to the outsider it appears hard all over. It has little familiar pieces like one's home town, set in a cement compounded of selfishness, avarice, callousness, and insensibility. And it is a cement that seems hardest to the tender and inexperienced. It felt pretty hard to me when I landed on it the first time, and the bumps I got I haven't forgotten yet.

Loew's eleven little theaters were so insignificant and their programs so unimportant that no staff reporter or drama critic ever covered them. And anything I wrote about them promptly got lost in the shuffle of wastebaskets.

"It sure was discouragin'," as my old friend Durante would say. It was about this time that I met the "Schnozzola," and gave him a tip that started our long friendship.



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After several weeks of bucking the stone wall of Broadway indifference toward Mr. Loew's theaters I was feeling pretty low. One night, with some of the fellows in Loew's office, I visited Coney Island and stopped in at a joint called Perry's.

There was a character there with a big nose playing the piano and singing in a husky, incredibly bad voice. His name was Jimmy Durante, and he was entertaining for what few coins the audience would toss his way. Oddly enough, no one laughed at his nose. He hadn't yet discovered how to cash in on it. All he did was sit at the piano, groaning some popular number in that gravelly voice of his, and every now and then he'd stop and call out, "All right, if you want some more, let's hear it jingle." And a few more coins would fly through the air. They'd roll under the tables and the bus boys would crawl around and pick them up for him. This act kept Jimmy doubly busy, one eye on the piano, the other on the coin collectors.

"Gotta watch them guys," he'd complain. "Some of that silver stuff sticks to their fingers."

It gave me an idea. "Why don't you tell 'em to wrap it up in folding money?" I said. "It won't roll so far."

Jimmy gave me his pixie grin and a nod of thanks. And sure enough this became his new line. It wasn't long after this that he began really to make a name for himself as a member of the zany trio of Clayton, Jackson, and Durante.

But these light moments of escape from my big problem were few and far between. The Loew organization was struggling to make a profit out of the chain and nothing that I did seemed to help.

Marcus Loew had left fur manufacturing to go into show business about five years before I joined him. He and Adolph Zukor, later founder of Paramount Pictures, started as partners in what they called a "shooting gallery." It was nothing

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more than a tiny store about twenty feet wide on 116th Street. Its pictures were the jerky one-reelers of the day and the price of admission was five cents. It was the origin of the term nickelodeon.

The frequent pauses and short intermissions between films while the operator changed reels were common features of the first motion-picture shows. Loew, fearing a restless audience might someday tear up his seats, hit upon the idea of hiring a violinist to fiddle in the gaps. Later he expanded the idea and hired a stout fifteen-year-old girl from Hartford to sing and put on a whole performance. She did nine shows in the afternoon and nine at night, and for the night shows she put on blackface. Since she had no time to leave the theater, either Zukor or Loew would go out and bring her a pot of thick soup, some bread and coffee, and for this, and a salary of \$25 a week, Sophie Tucker did eighteen shows a day. That's how she got her start.

After a couple of years Loew split with Zukor and went on his own. And it was shortly before I joined his organization that he made his spectacular \$2,000,000-deal with William Morris for all his holdings, the theaters, and the *Hanky Panky* show, everything except Morris's booking business. It was about the most decrepit bunch of theaters in the United States.

One of them was the Lyric, legendary in show business as one of the worst houses in the world. It was on the Hoboken water front, across the river in New Jersey, and it boasted the roughest audiences, the most rickety building, in a slum neighborhood, with vaudeville acts to match. The customers didn't always throw things, but few acts lasted more than two or three performances. It was not unusual for us to send over three or four replacements after a matinee.

But there were two, I remember, who succeeded at the

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Lyric and all the other houses in the Loew chain. And, strangely, they did the same type of act. They were billed as juggling acts, but as jugglers neither of them was very good. They simply could not control their various props. But every time they dropped a ball or made a miscue, their accompanying asides were extremely funny. As jugglers they were successful comedians, although one could see that neither of them had begun to recognize his real talent. They did later, though, and went on to success and fame in their separate careers as Fred Allen and W. C. Fields.

By the time I arrived on the scene Loew's eleven theaters had their main offices in the ancient American Music Hall building on the southeast corner of Eighth Avenue and Forty-second Street. This was another property Loew acquired in his deal with Morris. The Music Hall was decrepit and already thirty or forty years old, but it was Loew's biggest and most important theater when I joined him.

It also boasted a beautiful ladies' room, for beautiful ladies' rooms were a fetish with Loew. The first thing he did when he bought old theaters or built new ones (as he did in later years) was to order the ladies' rooms sumptuously decorated. It was said at one time that many ladies paid the ten cents' admission fee to his theaters simply to use his ladies' rooms. And in their day they were lavish places.

I asked Loew once why he did it, what was the background for the fetish. He told me in considerable frankness about his humble birth and how in his youth he knew none of these decencies. Practically none of the dwellings where he had lived had plumbing, and certainly none of them had beautiful toilets. "A lot of our customers still live like that," he said, "so it's a wonderful experience for them to visit one of my theaters." There was something inspiring about it, too, for thousands of them went home dissatisfied with their lot



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and set about doing something about it. The plumbing industry today owes more to Marcus Loew than it has ever acknowledged.

But Loew's vaudeville offerings never matched his ladies' rooms. The Lyric and the Music Hall were typical houses. The Lyric became the tryout house, where new acts were auditioned, and it was my job to sit with the Loew executives every Monday morning in the darkened Lyric and preview the acts. Those that made good qualified to move over to the American Music Hall, which, in our view, was the same as playing the Palace on Broadway. Loew loved the stage, real actors, stage scenery, and everything about live shows, but he was strictly small-time vaudeville in his tastes. He had none of the quality of the big time, the two-a-day, like the circuits headed up by E. F. Albee and B. F. Keith. They operated the fabled Palace, goal of every vaudevillian. Loew struggled to keep his theaters open all day long, with as many performances as the hours and his actors could encompass. There were about one hundred theaters in the country playing the big time. There were about four hundred others that booked small time or smaller. Loew's chain became the top "small-time" chain in the country.

Most of Loew's bills included "chasers," dull acts put on to empty the house so a new audience could come in. One act we had was a modeler of limited ability, who modeled faces of famous people in clay. He never had to worry about being laid off because he was the best chaser in vaudeville. The American Music Hall was really two theaters in one, a dilapidated room on the ground floor and an equally battered roof garden. The acts we played there played both auditoriums. I remember one particular Labor Day both houses were packed and the inept clay modeler spent his en-

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tire day going up and down in the elevator chasing out the customers after each show.

One of the first big acts Loew ever booked was a girl named Mae West. She had an act with an accordion player named Diero. She later married him.

Loew had a genius for making other people do his work and for picking the right men to do the job. He saw two fellows, brothers, make a success of a small public amusement park on the upper West Side, on the site of Fort George. They called it Fort George Park. It had a Ferris wheel and a few mechanical rides. The brothers were Nicholas M. and Joe Schenck. Loew recognized their showmanship and hired both of them. He made Nicholas general manager of his organization and Joe booking manager for his vaudeville acts. Later, Nick and Joe, to my mind the finest showmen I have ever known, bought and rebuilt the big Palisades Amusement Park on the bluff across the Hudson River.

Nick was the shrewd one, as far as business was concerned. He became my good friend almost at once. He was always very kind. He has not changed in the forty-odd years that I've known him. Once I saw Nick fire a theater manager who stole receipts, then find another job for him in Montreal, in a spot with less temptation. Nick only recently resigned as president of Loew's, Inc., which controls Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Joe is chairman of the board of Twentieth Century-Fox.

One other notable figure that came up through the Loew ranks was a young fellow who joined the staff soon after I did. He was fresh out of City College. He became a book-keeper and started at \$12 a week. His name is Charlie Moscowitz, today one of the dominant figures in the amusement world and vice-president of Loew's. I remember his early days in show business, how he always jumped at any chance

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to get out and visit the theaters. He wanted to learn all he could about the business. "I don't want to be a \$12-a-week bookkeeper all my life," he said. If we finished the evening in some theater in Brooklyn, Charlie would invariably invite me and anyone else from the Loew staff who was with us to his home. There we would nearly always find his father making wine, from cherries or grapes or whatever was available. They lived in a big five-story brownstone and Charlie had so many brothers and sisters that I never was able to count them. It was my first contact with the home life of these really fine people.

Loew was surrounding himself with people who were accomplishing things but I was having trouble. Finally, I went to see him. "Look," I said, "I'm not getting anywhere. I haven't gotten a break in any of the papers since I hit town. What do I do? How do I do it?" I was a little frantic.

"Go see Nellie Revell," he said.

Nellie, one of the great press agents of show business, took me in hand and showed me the ropes. She called every important newsman in town. "I got a kid here named Nils Granlund," she'd say, "and I want you to be nice to him. Give him a break."

Then there was Zit, another close friend of Loew, who was dramatic editor of the *Evening Journal*. He was the man who later started the widely read show-business weekly, *Zit's*. His real name was Charles Zittell, and on Loew's request he took me under his wing and taught me a lot about publicity. One of his reporters, at \$25 a week, is now one of our top producers, Jerry Wald.

(Later I got a lot of help also from a young girl reporter on the *Telegraph* named Louella Parsons, and a sports editor named Bat Masterson, the former bold sheriff of Dodge City, whose desk adjoined hers.)



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But with all this help and my daily struggles I still felt I was drawing a salary for doing nothing. I loved show business and I wanted to stay in it, but I certainly was no great success in the part of it I had chosen as my profession. After several weeks of this kind of discouragement I decided I'd better go back to Providence, if Bill Dwyer would have me back.

"I want to come back," I wrote. "I'm not getting anywhere in show business." Dwyer answered, "Come on. Your job's still open."

I had to break the news to Loew and I didn't know how he'd take it. He had been very nice to me, and more than patient. I remember his reaction as one of the high points in my life. He grinned his wide, gold-toothed grin and patted my shoulder.

"Look, my boy," he said. "I didn't expect you to set the world on fire." He sounded more like my father than my own father ever did. "What are you worrying about? I'm making an investment in you."

"How's that?" I said.

"If I pay you for six months or a year even, and you still don't accomplish much, I'm not worrying. You're going to be with me a long, long time. Just probe around a while, learn all you can about show business and your job. You'll be worth plenty to me someday, so stop worrying."

So I came to know and to love this little man. He never argued with me, or with any of his other employees. And he spoke with some reluctance when he had to correct any of us. In all my years in show business I have never met another as fair, as decent as Marcus Loew.

And it was Marcus Loew's lovable character that brought me success in my job with him. He was, in his day, the most loved figure in show business, and it was the great personal feeling which the ranking entertainment figures had for him

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that enabled me, later, to obtain top stars to go on tours for him. They loved him as a person, and no request in his name was ever too great for them. It should be an inspiration to everyone to know that one of the greatest organizations in show business was built up on friendship.

I stayed on and sweated it out, and then, after three months of firing only blanks, I got even in one big bang.

Loew had made money with *Hanky Panky* and he figured he could do it again. He built an elaborate musical show called *Pleasure Seekers*, put in Florence Moore and George White (later of *Scandals* fame), opened in the Winter Garden, and gave me a free hand with the publicity. At last I had something I could tie into. This was something I understood; musicals were my meat.

The Winter Garden was a legitimate house. It was the same Winter Garden that stands on Broadway to this day, between Fiftieth and Fifty-first streets. Originally it was a carbarn for the Broadway and Seventh Avenue trolleys. When a new carbarn was built, across Seventh Avenue from the rear of the old one, where the Taft Hotel is now, the old barn was converted into the Winter Garden. Long benches were strung out in front of the new carbarn, and conductors and motormen going on duty were always sunning themselves there, awaiting their cars.

Scratching around for a publicity stunt to coincide with the opening of *Pleasure Seekers*, I hit on an idea to use the neighbors across the street from the rear of the Winter Garden.

The gag was ostensibly to make a motion picture (motion pictures, in one- and two-reel melodramas, were just becoming popular) and I chose a pretty girl from the show to act as leading lady in the stunt I cooked up. In the gag, the girl was to play the role of a wife who leaves her man and goes

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into the chorus of the *Pleasure Seekers*; her husband, objecting, catches her at the Winter Garden stage door, on Seventh Avenue, opposite the carbarn. We rehearsed the scene backstage.

"I want you to come back to your home and children," the husband demands.

"No, I will not, unhand me, villain!" the fair girl cries.

Husband, frantic, pulls a gun and shoots her.

It wasn't art, perhaps, but what movie was in those days?

I got a cameraman and told him to make it look good. I gathered the stagehands and backstage gang around me. "Look, boys," I said, "when you hear a gunshot, rush out the stage door and grab this fellow, create a scene."

I tipped off the motormen and conductors sunning on the carbarn benches and told them they could get in the movie, too, if they wanted to. Everyone wanted to be in the movies in those days and no one had to be paid. In fact, no one in mob scenes was ever paid in those days, except for a few leading actors.

So, right on cue, the girl came walking down the street and the actor grabbed her like it said in the script. The girl resisted. "Unhand me, villain!" she cried, so everyone within the block could hear her. "Bang!" went the gun, and people began pouring toward the scene. Stagehands and trolley-car men and several hundred unscripted volunteers all got into the act at once. The poor actor was nearly killed. There must have been thirty men hanging onto him, all of them trying to get their faces into the camera. The cameraman himself was nearly pushed off his feet as he ground away as if recording a DeMille epic.

Meanwhile, three boys from the chorus had been planted around the neighborhood with special instructions. When the riot got under way, this trio, all ready with nickels in their



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hands, telephoned the Polyclinic Hospital, the fire department, and the police department. "A girl's being shot and a mob is killing a man at Seventh Avenue and Fiftieth Street!" they shouted.

In a couple of minutes the ambulance and the fire trucks arrived on the scene and policemen seemed to be coming out of the cracks in the sidewalk. It was one of the daffiest disturbances Broadway ever saw, or read about, for, of course, it was adequately covered by all the papers—I saw to that.

I didn't stay to see the end of it. On the way back to my office I met Nick Schenck. "The police are looking for you," he said.

I hid out for several days while Nick placated the police department. When I finally did get up nerve enough to put in an appearance, they had me on the carpet, but good! "You ever do anything like that again involving the police," they warned, "and we're going to throw you in the clink." I knew they meant it, too.

I sneaked back to my office then, wondering how Loew would take it.

"See," he beamed. "Didn't I tell you you'd make good?"

After I hit with *Pleasure Seekers*, things were a little easier. Through it I finally got to know the right newspaper people, the drama editors and their reviewers, and, more important, they knew me.

What helped, too, was that Loew was expanding, building new show places as well as buying old ones. Some were outside the New York area, and hardly a week went by that he didn't tell us in that soft, quiet way of his that he had bought a new theater (usually some broken-down dump he fixed up and made successful), or that he had bought a piece of land and was about to build.

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Occasionally he would invite me to go along on a prospecting or inspection trip to some weird corner of the city. I was a flattered nineteen-year-old, and at such times I felt I really "belonged." Once Loew and I drove in his big old Pierce-Arrow limousine over to Brooklyn and stopped at a building that seemed on its last legs.

"There's a theater I just bought," he said.

It was then called the Royal. They had had burlesque there, but it had been chased out of town. Later an Italian opera company had taken it over and tried to make it pay at a dollar admission. Italian opera for a buck!

"Mr. Loew," I said, "if they couldn't make it pay at a buck a head, how are you going to make money on a ten-cent admission?"

"My boy," he said, "you got to realize this important fact in show business. It's far easier to get ten people with a dime apiece than one man with a dollar."

That was the basic principle of Loew's method of operation. He built a tremendous fortune out of it.

His plan with all these theaters was to clean them up, fix them up with fancy ladies' rooms as I mentioned, and then have a big opening. He also built new theaters, and about the time I joined him he completed the Avenue B Theatre in the heart of the East Side ghetto. I created the myth that this house was erected on the exact site of his birthplace. It wasn't true, but it made good publicity.

The district was poor, overcrowded, and eaten with vice and crime. This is the neighborhood that spawned some of the most infamous names in gangland. Dopey Benny Fein and Monk Eastman began here and so did Lucky Luciano.

On opening night of Avenue B Theatre the Schencks and Loew invited all their uptown friends, and a lot of high-class people in and out of show business were on hand. The

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lobby at intermission was filled with celebrities and socialites. It was a gala evening, especially for the local folks. More pockets got picked, more jewelry was lost that evening than at any other theater opening before or since. An uptown police captain even had his badge lifted.

But despite its big opening the Avenue B didn't prosper and Loew sent me to see what could be done to help it. I had been making inspection trips nearly every evening with Nick Schenck, after my regular workday, and with his encouragement I had made several suggestions that had proved helpful to the sick theaters. Thus, when they decided that the Avenue B needed doctoring, they turned the job over to me. "The Avenue B is a beautiful new theater, Granny. Find out what ails it and fix it."

The theater had been built for vaudeville, but they were showing only pictures in it. I walked around the neighborhood for days and talked to a lot of people and eventually came to the conclusion that most of them never saw anything beyond Rivington, Norfolk, and Delancey streets. They were starved for live entertainment, but Broadway to them was as far from Delancey Street as it was from Rome or Warsaw. Obviously, live shows was the answer to the theater's problem.

But vaudeville acts meant additional overhead and I didn't think Loew would go for that kind of cure. I decided that maybe there was enough talent right in the neighborhood to put on amateur contests. But we tried it first with song contests. All big music publishers had song pluggers, much as they do today. The pluggers were pretty fair singers who went around with a piano player and plugged the publisher's songs wherever they could find an audience, in cabarets, saloons, theaters, anywhere the plugger could get in. It frequently was good entertainment, and it was free. I phoned every publishing house in Tin Pan Alley and they jumped at



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the idea. We even offered a few prizes. We packed the Avenue B clear up to the roof.

It worked so well then that we decided to try the amateur idea. But such a show required a master of ceremonies and there was no one on the Loew staff who would or could take on the thankless job. They said that since I had organized the thing, and it was my idea anyway, that I was the one who should do it. It was my first stage appearance.

In my walks around the neighborhood I had picked up a lot of Yiddish and a little Italian and I sprinkled my M.C. monologue liberally with it. The audience ate it up. It wasn't long before they were calling me "The Macher" (which they pronounced magh-her and means boss or master) and "Der Langer" (which, as far as I could tell, meant the long or skinny one). We were soon all one big happy family and I found myself in my off hours treating the local kids to watermelon (at a penny a slice) or baked sweet potatoes which we purchased from the vendors that lined the streets. And I came to realize that audiences, that people are pretty much the same all over. Give them half a chance and they'll be friendly. Entertain them and they'll love you.

I enjoyed my first experience as a master of ceremonies, as a "macher," and from then on appearing before an audience was never any different to me than my appearance at the Avenue B.

After we ran out of amateur song-and-dance and acrobatic artists we began to add one or two professional acts. One of the first to appear at the Avenue B was Lottie Mayer and Her Diving Girls. Among East Siders, a professional diving performance, or even a swimming pool, was about as strange as interspace travel. The feature of the act was Lottie's curvaceous figure, clad in a skin-tight bathing suit. I printed 50,000 paper tape measures, bearing her measurements, to

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prove our claim that she had the most perfect figure in the world.

Lottie had a portable tank that was installed on the stage, and she and her girls went through a flashy diving routine that proved a real business getter in the Avenue B.

When the act began to wear off, I brought in the amateurs again—this time, amateur divers. At least fifty kids responded to my call. I couldn't believe there were that many people on the East Side who could dive. There weren't. But they were game. Most of them just came out and fell into the water and before the last of them had hit the pool the tank was half empty and the stage was a lake.

Loew happened to drop in during the contest and he got such a kick out of the way the audience was laughing and enjoying the spectacle that he had a big tank built under the stage with a sliding cover. From then on whenever we had a diving contest the patrons in the first five rows always brought umbrellas.

Anyway, the assorted contests, from songs to splashes, eventually wiped the red ink off the Avenue B's books, and I moved my scene of activity way uptown to the Seventh Avenue Theatre in Harlem.

Joe Vogel, assistant manager at the Harlem spot, was one of my earliest friends in show business. He is president of Loew's theaters today, but when I was delegated to give him a hand at the Seventh Avenue his biggest problem seemed to be to get enough of a certain kind of picture his audiences wanted. "I don't know the name of the featured actor in these films," he said, "but, Granny, if you can find out who he is I think we can boost our take by advertising those films he is in."

In those ancient days no one with a name he was proud of would let it be advertised on the film. Most actors did not

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want their names mentioned, because it was considered a disgrace to be in the movies. And most of the picture companies were chary about mentioning names, because the players might get the big head and ask for more money.

"What's he look like?" I asked.

"Wears an old derby, floppy shoes, and sports a cane and a small mustache," Joe said, describing the unknown actor.

That, and the fact that the films came from the Mack Sennett Studios in California, was all I had to go on. I wrote the studio and finally, after several weeks, they sent me a photograph of the guy and said his name was Charlie Chaplin. I showed the picture to Joe. "That's him," he said.

We had some three-sheets and one-sheets made up in our own sign shop and plastered them up in front of the theater the next time Joe booked a Chaplin picture. It was about the only advertising we did in those days. There were no trailers to show coming attractions, and most of the slides used just advertised neighborhood merchants. I figured an audience already in the theater was the best prospect for coming shows, so we made up some slides advertising Charlie's films. So far as I know, this was the first "trailer" advertising ever used in movie houses. At least, Vogel and I got the credit for "finding" Chaplin, advertising him, and being the first to see money potential in him.

Loew was not one to sit back and wait while one or two sick theaters got well. While we were still struggling with the Avenue B he built the big Orpheum uptown. And it was at the Orpheum that we established some memorable firsts in show business. The Orpheum, located at Eighty-sixth Street and Third Avenue, in the German neighborhood of Yorkville, was bowed in with the first big official opening of a theater in New York, with all the hoop-de-do we know today as a premiere.



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We brought in the entire cast of *Pleasure Seekers* and invited just about everyone who was anyone in show business. We brought the stars in hired limousines, one to a car, and the parade up to the front door blocked traffic for miles. Monster sunlight arcs, recently developed for motion-picture use, were set around the front of the theater and they lighted the whole neighborhood. Cameramen, newspaper people, and a parade of celebrities made it a night for the books. It set the pattern for all the big bright openings to this day.

The opening for the Orpheum was so successful that the celebrity show and the lavish production on stage became standard operating procedure whenever we opened a new theater. Nevertheless, even with the new houses and the publicity splash I was keeping up on *Pleasure Seekers*, we had nothing much to advertise in the papers; and without advertising, newspapers are reluctant to give free publicity. We had no big vaudeville names in our houses yet, and there were still no name motion pictures or picture stars.

It was then that we got the breaks, two of them, that boomed us into the public eye for keeps.

The first was *The Squaw Man*, the first five-reel, feature-length film. Cecil B. DeMille's pioneering venture has been told too many times for me to repeat it here. One of the most dramatic moments in motion-picture history is the story of his trip West in search of the proper locale, how he finally completed the film in a barn in an orange grove in a place called Hollywood, and how Jesse Lasky and Samuel Goldwyn financed the production and brought the film to New York with more trepidation than confidence. I was in Loew's office when Lasky brought in the film. "Look what I got," was all he said. Despair was in his voice.

"Hell, no," said Joe Schenck, when he saw it was a five-reel picture. "You want to ruin our vaudeville business?"

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Joe didn't like the five-reel picture because it meant cutting out three of his eight vaudeville acts. (This was the man who later became the president of Twentieth Century-Fox and one of the all-time greats of motion pictures.)

Nevertheless, we previewed the picture and I was impressed, not by the acting or the subject of the picture, but because it ran, not one or two, but for five full reels! Why, that was a whole show in itself! "We can make money with that idea," I insisted. Loew was skeptical but he finally agreed to try it. "It's your baby," he said.

I figured that the title, the director, or the actors wouldn't mean anything to the public. The public, I thought, would react the same way I did. They'd go for the novelty of the five reels. I advertised it:

"Five-Reel Motion Picture, First Time in Any Theater," and "Doors Open One Hour Earlier."

That last was a magic phrase. One hour earlier. The customers figured that it was such a big show, it had to start earlier. Actually, Joe Schenck had to cut only three of the eight acts off the vaudeville bill to make it about the same length show we usually gave.

*The Squaw Man* started picture business as we know it today, and it put Loew's theaters into the big time of movie houses.

It was about this same time that Loew broke into the major league of vaudeville with Singer's Midgets.

Loew called me into his office one day and introduced me to Baron Leo Singer, director of the midgets. The Baron was pretty blue. He had a troupe of Austrian and Hungarian midgets that had become famous throughout Europe. Keith-Albee, at the top of American vaudeville entrepreneurs, signed them up for an American tour at \$1,500 a week. It was an extraordinary fee, but the troupe consisted of eighteen

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midgets, two baby elephants, a couple of ponies, and about twenty dogs. They were well worth it to any big-time vaudeville circuit.

But the midgets had played an engagement in England before they came to the United States, and there they were caught when World War I broke out. The British Government decided that these little people must surely be enemy agents, and although they managed to get to New York, the deal with Keith-Albee fell through. Keith-Albee were afraid to book them because of the bad publicity they had had in England. So when the Baron came to Loew, it must have been a case of grasping at the last straw. He was so desperate that he was willing to accept almost any proposition.

Loew, fortunately, had none of the scruples about bad publicity that his big competitors had, and he didn't have the same kind of money either. He offered the Baron \$600 a week and the Baron grabbed it. I knew it was a lot for Loew to pay, since his top performers got only thirty or forty bucks a week.

"Granny," he said, and I could hear it coming, only this time it was plural, "these are your babies."

Well, I immediately fell in love with Singer's Midgets. They were the most wonderful little people I ever met. They were all ladies and gentlemen, and all extremely talented. There were six ladies, all exquisitely proportioned. Dora Vege, the prima donna, was the most beautiful. She had only one fault, she fell in love with every man she saw who was more than six feet tall. I was a six-footer myself, so I had a difficult time convincing her that she had the wrong attitude about men.

I enjoyed the midgets and I'm sure they enjoyed America. After a long run at Loew's theaters in New York I toured them at all the top houses in the country. They remained a



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sensation on American stages for a decade and even made a movie. Some of the box-office records they set remain unsurpassed to this day.

What with the *Pleasure Seekers*, *The Squaw Man*, and Singer's Midgets, Loew theaters were able to climb out of the category of small time. No longer were they ignored by the theater reporters and drama critics. And neither was I.

# 4

## *A Lot to Learn about Show Business*

For several years around the time of World War I Marcus Loew acquired theaters at a tremendous rate. He opened new ones (and refurbished old ones) faster than anyone else ever has before or since. And since it was my job to publicize the openings and line up celebrities for the premieres, I frequently found myself going in three or four directions at once. An eighteen-hour day was no exception, and when we opened three theaters in one week I hardly saw a bed for several days.

Loew's original string of eleven theaters was located in New York or near by. Before 1917 he had added houses in Quebec, Toronto, Hamilton, London, Ottawa, and Montreal in Canada. Shortly afterward he opened new houses in Cleveland and St. Louis and bought an old house in Pittsburgh. He acquired the Southern Theatres from Ed. Schiller of Birmingham fame. This chain put us in Birmingham, Knoxville, Nashville, and several other Dixie towns. Loew built the palatial Loew's State in Los Angeles and bought the huge Sullivan-Considine circuit of Empress Theatres coast to coast, and that made his operations nationwide. The Loew chain eventually comprised nearly two hundred theaters, and Loew was still buying when he died (in 1927).

Local publicity and advertising generally were handled by

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the various theater managers. My job was in the head office, when we needed to round up a group of stars for an opening, or bring in a special program for a sick house. I hadn't been with Loew a year before I had a reputation in this field and no theater in the Loew chain just opened its doors and began business in a normal way. There had to be an "opening," and if it was a new theater, or something spectacular in films, then it had to be a premiere. My job was to get the party organized, see that it hit town with the appropriate splash, and, if no one else were willing, act as master of ceremonies. My instructions from Loew, or Nick Schenck, seldom sounded like anything more than a short telegram.

"I bought a theater over in Brooklyn called the Warwick, Granny," said Loew one day. "Go look after it."

Usually I'd have to go to the telephone book to find out what he was talking about. I'd take a look at the house and find a crew crawling all over it, hammering and painting and refurbishing it from end to end. Opening night you wouldn't know the place, and with all the ballyhoo it would usually get off to a pretty good start.

But it was never a routine job for me. Every opening was different, every premiere had to be more glamorous and exciting than the one before. And there was always something happening to make each one memorable. Take, for instance, that old Warwick job I just mentioned. A press agent who had been handling a national beauty contest came in while I was planning the opening. He started telling me about the contest and then about the beautiful redhead who had won it.

"Look, Granny," he said, "this little girl's from Brooklyn and I thought you might like to introduce her at the Warwick."

National beauty winner, and from Brooklyn—it sounded



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like a natural for the Warwick opening. "O. K.," I said. "Bring her around."

She was pretty and vivacious and appealing in more ways than one. "What's your name?" I said, forgetting in the rush of opening-night details.

"Clara," she said. "Clara Bow."

Loew usually put on a private party after these openings, and on this particular night I had booked tables at the Boardwalk, a currently popular spot in Times Square. It was located in what once had been the upstairs dining room of Rector's, where Ted Lewis first scored as a maestro. I made reservations for about forty guests, most of them cinema stars and Loew executives.

After the program at the Warwick, and after I had introduced Clara Bow along with the other celebrities, we were starting for the Boardwalk when Clara came up to me. "Please, Mr. Granlund," she said, "take me along. I want to go to that party more than anything in the world."

I tried to tell her it was a private party, that only those for whom reservations had been made would be there, that it wasn't my affair, and so on. She wouldn't take no for an answer. "Please, Mr. Granlund," she begged, over and over. "They won't even know I'm there."

I never saw such a stage-struck kid. What was I to do with this fifteen-year-old who refused to listen to my protests? She went to the party.

Afterward she didn't want to go back to Brooklyn. The upshot of it was that I had her on my hands for weeks, or at least she made me feel that she was my responsibility. Finally, I heard that a guy I knew was making a movie about whaling. He was on location at New Bedford, Massachusetts, and I called him. I talked him into putting Clara in the movie and paying her \$50 a week. I never thought the picture would be

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produced. The whaling industry was a pretty quiet thing at that time, so if the film were produced I didn't see how it could be very successful. All I was interested in was finding a place for Clara, so I hoped at least they'd keep shooting for a while.

The picture was made, and it was named *Down to the Sea in Ships*. The film was a hit and so was Clara, and a few months later I was begging her for a personal appearance tour of Loew theaters.

This was in the days before "sex appeal," of course, even before "sex" was a conversational topic or a commonly used word, but we found another word to express the same thing. Elinor Glyn, a bizarre author if ever I saw one, wrote a book entitled *It*. *It*, according to Mrs. Glyn, was a certain physical quality possessed by a girl that was irresistibly alluring to men. It had a lot to do with love-making, and Mrs. Glyn was the current authority on the subject. She had been building her prestige in that field for twenty years, ever since her popular *Three Weeks* was published in 1907. *Three Weeks* had been made into a hit movie starring that early "vamp," Theda Bara. So when *It* proved a best seller, movie producers clamored for it, and every movie star who thought she had "it" wanted the heroine's role.

Clara Bow got the role, and from then on Clara was known as the "it girl."

At the height of her fame and popularity Clara married the cowboy film star, Rex Bell, and soon thereafter settled down to what has become a long and happy union. (Rumor has it that Rex, at present Lieutenant Governor of Nevada, may be the next governor of the state.)

And just to make the story come full circle, with a big climax, I got the job of staging the premiere of the picture at the opening of our St. Louis theater.

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And it, too, was a night to remember.

Elinor Glyn was past sixty at the time of our St. Louis opening. By then she had established a reputation for many weird habits, one of which was a dead-white complexion which she probably applied with chalk or calcimine.

At the performance that evening in St. Louis the stars were arranged on stage in a sort of cabaret setting, and each stepped forward when called. That is, all of them were arranged on stage except Mrs. Glyn. She insisted on waiting in the wings. I glanced her way when I was about to introduce her and the shock of what I saw nearly unsettled me. I thought at first she was a ghost, for besides the chalk-white face, relieved only by a blood-red gash of lip rouge, her gown was dead white also and for all the world like a shroud. But the topper was a huge lily which she carried held across her breast!

To say that she made a grand entrance would be putting it mildly. She was a shock even to the performers on stage, because none of them had seen her in the wings before she came on. She came into the lights looking like death only slightly warmed over.

She began her remarks most intelligently and seriously, but the audience tittered. And then, just in the middle of her talk, a huge fly began buzzing around her head in the spotlight. Elinor stopped speaking. She was transfixed by the insect. Suddenly she commenced to beat the air with the lily.

To say that the audience was convulsed would be an understatement. Even the stars on stage, much as they tried to maintain their equilibrium out of professional courtesy, simply could not restrain their guffaws. It was a riot. It was the only time I ever heard of a little fly breaking up a show.

Loew was buying up theaters and I was opening them so rapidly for a while that I had to organize several stars as a



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unit and actually take them out on tour, from one opening to another. The idea was to pick three or four big names and then dress up the show with a group of beautiful girls from some musical. We had a mutually helpful deal with Flo Ziegfeld for the girls. We used our openings as tryout spots for most of his numbers. It gave him an inexpensive way to polish a number before he staged it in New York, and it gave us some extra-good talent, plus the prestige of being able to say the numbers were from the *Follies*.

One such tour took us through a large section of the South, after Loew built new houses in Memphis and New Orleans. Texas Guinan was on this tour and I remember her as the life of the party from the time it started until it returned to Broadway.

Texas had been a star at the Winter Garden, playing opposite De Wolf Hopper, and lately had been in a series of two-reelers called *The Two-Gun Sheriff*, in which she played a woman law enforcer. But she was now more than forty, she was not pretty, and her voice, once a favorite of the musical-comedy stage, was getting shaky. To all appearances she was through in show business. Nevertheless, she still had her bouncing enthusiasm and sharp Irish wit. Most of all, she had a lot of friends. I think the latter was the only reason we took her on the tour.

When we opened in Memphis, Texas' car in the motorcade we put on to advertise the show carried a big sign in front identifying her. She always dressed flamboyantly and this time she wore a huge picture hat about two feet wide, from which hung yellow, blue, purple, and pink ribbons. The rest of her costume was just as gaudy. She stood up in her car and threw kisses right and left, and there wasn't any doubt about it, she made a hit with the crowd.

About a dozen little ragamuffins of various shades from

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black to white followed her right into the lobby of her hotel. Texas was all for taking the whole bunch right up to her room, but the clerk wouldn't stand for it. He started to shoo them away, then I saw Texas bend over and whisper something to one little vagabond who wore a Western Union cap. Immediately the boys faded away and Texas went on to her room.

A few minutes later the boy in the Western Union cap came back and announced that he had a telegram for Miss Guinan, "Pussonal delivery, suh!" The clerk let him pass. A moment later another kid showed up, also wearing a messenger's cap, and repeated the magic words.

All told, in a matter of fifteen or twenty minutes Texas received about that many personally delivered telegrams, but the strange part of it was that none of the messenger boys appeared to leave the hotel. Also there was a big delivery of ice cream and cake to Texas' room.

What a party those poor kids must have had. Texas wouldn't let me in, or anybody else who might publicize it, but she told me later how she got Western Union messenger caps for all of them. She simply threw out the window the one the first boy wore and repeated it for all the others.

She did such a good job for us on that trip that I was able to convince Loew that she could handle a whole show built around her. He agreed, and we designed an act that capitalized on her two-gun movie role. We got her a white horse and dressed her in a beautiful white Western outfit and surrounded her with rope spinners and Western songs. It was a hit, and she toured for more than a year in it.

My circle of acquaintances and friends was expanding about as rapidly as Loew's string of theaters. I was meeting new people every day and making friendships that were to mean a lot to me as the years rolled by. But there was one

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big national catastrophe that occurred about this time that made me more friends than anything I could have done on my own.

Prohibition rocked the country and created a whole new pattern of social graces and disgraces. And anyone fortunate enough to have a case of Scotch, or even one bottle, was considered to be a pretty important man. Fortunately for me, we were having a lot of Canadian openings about this time and I never returned from a trip to Ottawa or Montreal or Toronto or Hamilton that I didn't bring back enough liquor to soak a lot of newsprint. In fact, I soon discovered that a quart of Scotch would get me almost as much publicity as a quart of ink would print. It opened doors and got me a lot of friends in a lot of places.

But Prohibition brought in the era of gangsterism, and although I was to meet this evil head on more than once in later years, nothing was more frightening than my first encounter with mobsters. We had been tipped off that some of the hoodlums had decided to move into show business and had picked Loew's to "organize." Their plan was to form a "union" of the ushers, cashiers, porters, and such, and black-mail management into regular "contributions." One of our box-office girls heard that a meeting was being held in a hall on Rivington Street near the Avenue B Theatre. Charlie Moscowitz suggested we go over and take a look.

They couldn't have picked a tougher neighborhood in which to hold their meeting. And, though we didn't know it at the time, we couldn't have picked a tougher meeting to attend. Li'l Augie Pisano was conducting the meeting, although at that time he was still operating under his real name, Anthony Carfano. It was not until later that Li'l Augie moved up to the big time in mobdom. He was only learning the ropes then, and how well he learned them might have



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been seen as late as 1955 when he was indicted on charges of misuse of labor-union insurance funds.

We weren't in the hall very long that night before some of the hoods spotted us and someone in the audience identified us. It was a ticklish moment for Charlie and me and I guess we were lucky that all they did was throw us out, but literally. Aside from a few bruises and a lost hat (mine) we escaped this first scrape with gangsters without serious injury. I was discovering that there was a lot to learn about show business that wasn't show business.

# 5

## *If You Live Long Enough*

Backstage in almost any theater in those early days a sign prominently displayed on the wall carried this ominous message:

"Don't send your laundry out until after the first show."

The pointed instructions implied simply that the manager could fire an actor any time, regardless of the terms on which he was hired. The acting profession was a tenuous one in a great many vaudeville houses, and the ax fell indiscriminately on the capable and the inept. No performer was safe and no contract was designed to protect him. It was a situation ripe for labor agitators.

The only reason Loew's theaters and a few of the top chains such as Keith-Albee were not bothered at first was due to their notably fair treatment of performers. It was one of the secrets of Loew's success, of that I am sure. Marcus Loew was always able to put himself in the other man's shoes and if anybody ever lived by the golden rule, he did. He was one of the first to realize the great fundamental of good management-employee relations: that a happy employee gives a good performance, makes for good business.

But there was another side to this secret of Loew. He had an uncanny judgment where ability was concerned. He never hired many people, either performers or business staff, whose

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talents were commonplace. And the fact that he could get talented people at the comparatively moderate salaries he paid was a credit to his personality.

But show business then, as it is today, was full of inept performers who had no business being in the profession. The rewards for real talent and the public acclaim for success encourage a lot of marginal talent, and a great many who have no talent at all, to spend their lives trying to get in. All their persistence ever gets them is a place on the fringes, discontent, and failure. The same industry applied in some other profession might make them happier at least if not successful.

It was a situation, as I said, that was ripe for labor agitators and although Loew's was not troubled by the first disturbances, we eventually had our share. Prohibition brought in the gangster, and gangster methods were in evidence in the early labor difficulties involving show business. When a British agitator named Harry Montford came to New York and an organization known as the White Rats appeared on the scene, large numbers of disgruntled, generally incapable performers joined up.

Show business was not particularly concerned at first. Really capable performers were not joining the White Rats or listening to Montford, so vaudeville executives paid little attention to the growing membership in the dissident outfit. But it was an ostrich attitude on the part of management.

Among the heads of the larger circuits, however, one man did realize that the menace endangered all of vaudeville. Nick Schenck foresaw the trouble all of us were headed for. What's more, as general manager of the budding Loew Circuit, Nick wielded considerable influence among a few of the heads of other outfits, including E. F. Albee, general manager of Keith-Albee. Albee was willing to listen, and, as a result, Schenck and Albee formed the Vaudeville Managers' Protec-



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tive Association. It embraced the owners or managers of several hundred vaudeville theaters across the country.

The managers had barely organized when the first small cloud came over the horizon with a strike of actors against a vaudeville circuit in Oklahoma City. Right after that things began to happen fast.

Loew phoned me at home late one evening with orders to get to the office immediately. The White Rats had struck the entire Loew Circuit of theaters, and from the beginning gangster tactics were being employed. The first move came when large quantities of overripe vegetables were thrown onto the stages of Loew houses, in an effort to intimidate the performers who had refused to join the White Rats.

The attack was unwarranted and ridiculous, for Loew's relations with performers had always been excellent. Most of them preferred playing in Loew houses to any other. When a performer was signed for Loew, he was paid in full, even if he did not make good. But the topper was a vituperative pamphlet excoriating the Loew theaters and management personnel. I had never seen Loew exhibit any rancor until that night. The lies contained in the pamphlet and the obvious injustice of the statements by Montford would have been recognizable as communist tactics a few years later.

It was the opinion of Leo Friedman, attorney for Loew theaters (he is still with the organization after forty years), that if someone could get Montford himself to hand over one of the pamphlets, it would constitute criminal libel. I volunteered to try.

Montford had been in town only a short time. I had never met him, and I didn't think he knew me, so I decided to go directly to him at the White Rats headquarters. I would attempt to pass myself off as a newspaperman.

A reporter from the *Tribune* happened to be in the office

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and he loaned me his police pass. I stuck it in my hatband and set out for the White Rats office. I got into Montford's office without any difficulty, although the place was seething with activity.

Montford obliged me with a pamphlet and accompanied it with more words of vituperation. I listened while he called Loew and other theater managers all the vile things he could think of. Then I started for the exit. I'd gone halfway down the stairs when an actor, looking up from below, yelled, "That's Granlund, press agent for Loew! What's he doing here?"

The situation rapidly became desperate, but I made it to the street and fled.

The words contained in the pamphlet and the manner in which I received it directly from Montford provided the legal basis by which the White Rats were eventually put out of business. Meanwhile, however, Montford marked me for some special treatment.

In a short while the strike degenerated into a bloody battle between the discredited actors and virtually all of vaudeville. Pickets were thrown around the theaters, seeking to keep both actors and audiences from entering. Agitators in large groups got into theaters and hurled rotten vegetables and bottles at the actors on stage.

Nick Schenck, determined to fight fire with fire, hired "detectives," tough guys whose job it was to guard the theaters and the executive personnel. I had to make the rounds of the houses in New York City, and this daily tour was one of the most dangerous jobs in the organization. It was especially so after Montford instructed his henchmen to "get me." Nick knew this, so he assigned a toughy by the name of Happy Goldstein to accompany me wherever I went.

Happy was quite a character. If we made the complete cir-

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cuit and got back to headquarters without his having had a single opportunity to use his big fists, he complained. It got so I had to go out of my way to find a fracas.

Eventually, however, Friedman's suit and the cooperation of the theater managers broke the power of the White Rats. Montford was accused of perjury and inciting riot, and the National Vaudeville Artists was formed and took over as the official organization of vaudeville people. The moguls of the theatrical business called me in and presented me with a new Studebaker sedan. "In appreciation," they said, "for your loyal and untiring efforts during the recent emergency." It sounded like a citation for bravery in battle when all I had done was spend company money in advertising and publicity and ride around in a car I'd borrowed from a Vitagraph film starlet named Doris Kenyon.

This skirmish should not be confused with the trouble that broke out a few months later. The National Vaudeville Artists and the vaudeville theater management got together and ironed out their difficulties. The next fight did not involve vaudeville and it did not have the support of gangster tactics. It was a clean fight for legitimate demands, a request for equitable working conditions for the legit actors in musical comedy and drama. An organization was formed called Actors' Equity, and it presented its demands to the producers. The Shuberts, George M. Cohan, William A. Brady, and David Belasco were the principal targets of Equity.

The producers chose to fight and the great Equity strike of 1919 was the result. The producers asked Nick Schenck to join them, hoping his experience would help them defeat Equity.

"I want nothing to do with this one," Nick said. "The actors have a legitimate complaint." He was right. Chorus girls, for instance, were getting about \$25 a week and having



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to buy their own stage footwear. Furthermore, no one, from chorus to star, got paid for rehearsal time and frequently that meant working for weeks without pay. "I've had enough, too," I said.

The Shuberts made me an offer to help the managers break the strike, but I thought the actors were right, and said so. (They never knew how close they came to getting me for peanuts when I first hit New York.)

Nick helped me out of the situation by giving me a vacation. I hadn't had a day off in three years. "Fade away for a while," he said. "This'll blow over soon, and a change of scene won't hurt you, I guess."

I was delighted, and I decided really to "fade." I put five bucks in my pocket and my oldest clothes on my back and headed for New Bedford and salt water, back to my first love. I shipped out on the *Natalie*, Frank Butler skipper, and enjoyed a rough and smelly seventeen-day swordfishing cruise through North Atlantic waters.

I would not recommend a swordfishing cruise for the faint of heart, for few experiences at sea can equal it for pure adventure. The Portuguese, Irish, and Downeasters who sail out of Boston, Provincetown, New Bedford, Edgartown, and Nantucket are a hardy breed. I've never known men I admired more, except, perhaps, rodeo cowboys. And in those days they had to be tough indeed, for their ships had no engines, no sanitary facilities, no safety devices, no quick access to medical care except a bottle of iodine and a little salve in the captain's cabin.

The *Natalie* was a typical swordfishing boat. It had a crew of six, which was average. We were never warm or dry; our days were filled with danger and our nights broken by night watches. My bedding consisted of a thin mattress, which I never saw, because it was always too dark where it was. And

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it was always wet. It was like sleeping in a swamp. I covered the mattress with a piece of canvas and slept with an oilskin coat over me to shed the constant drip coming through the leaky deck.

But the greatest danger was in the killing of the swordfish and I doubt if this risk has been lessened much by modern methods. Captain Butler would take his stand aloft where he could spot the swordfish swimming just under the surface. The moment he would sight one, he'd slide down the forestay to the pulpit, a waist-high contraption of iron at the end of the long bowsprit. From this vantage point he would call directions back to the helmsman for port or starboard helm and with perfect timing he'd hurl his long harpoon into the swordfish.

The haft of the harpoon was attached to a thin line, some five or six hundred feet long, and this in turn was attached to an airtight keg. The instant the harpoon was hurled, the helmsman would run forward with the keg and toss it overboard.

From here on the dorymen took over. First they would pick up the keg and then gradually reel in the line until they were close enough to the fish to give it a *coup de grâce* with an ax or a lance through an eye. But it seldom was as simple as that. The wounded fish, looking for the cause of its pain, usually sighted the tiny dory and came at it full speed. A 500-pound swordfish swimming at a speed of about forty miles per hour can slice through a fourteen-foot dory like a hot knife through butter. When this happens, and it happens frequently, the fisherman has to fight for his life.

On our first morning out Captain Butler sighted a beautiful new ship coming up out of the south. "That's the *Doughty*," he said. "A new ship." And then he explained that the government had given it to replace one sunk by a

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German submarine. But when the *Doughty* came alongside the crew appeared sad and depressed. Her captain hailed us. "We lost a man," he said. "Blood poisoning. Swordfish ran through his dory and into his leg. He died before we could get him to New London."

So before we caught our first swordfish I knew it took guts and know-how and I didn't have very much of either. But I was willing to learn and anxious to know for myself whether or not a few years of city life had softened my "innards." I took the helm when Captain Butler was aloft or in the pulpit, and that was a job I could do well. The dorymen took turns going after the fish and Captain Butler said I could take a turn at that, too, if all the others were busy.

Then one day we ran into a whole school of swordfish, all of them big fellows, and Captain Butler was throwing harpoons like a big-league pitcher. Pretty soon every man available was out in a dory pulling in the kegs and lines. Captain Butler motioned to the one remaining dory. "Over with you," he yelled, and over I went.

I picked up a keg without much difficulty and then looked to see what I had on the other end of the line. Suddenly I saw a flash of fin and the next moment the long sword came through the boat within inches of my knee. I grabbed the ax provided for this emergency and frantically hacked away at the sword, while the big fish shook the little dory like a terrier would shake a rat. I was half-drowned and badly bruised before I finally killed the fish with the lance. And it was not until I got back on deck and realized what a narrow escape I'd had that I felt any fright and then I was so scared I couldn't stand.

It was the bloodiest, dirtiest, busiest, most exhausting cruise I ever made, and I enjoyed it tremendously.

And when I finally got back to New York the Equity strike



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was settled and show business was booming to make up for the time lost.

My responsibilities had already exceeded those of a press agent. I was getting more and more into the field of actual organization and handling of vaudeville shows. During the war I had been director of propaganda and publicity for all show business throughout the metropolitan area and had handled the entertainment for practically all the bond rallies and Red Cross campaigns. And the big names of entertainment flocked to these benefits for war charities. On one occasion we took over the Metropolitan Opera House, and a host of such performers as Harry Houdini, Fred Stone, and Will Rogers went on, hour after hour. For that show a huge table had been set up at the rear of the cavernous Metropolitan stage, behind a curtain, where all sorts of wonderful food was arranged for the entertainers. It was provided by Arnold Reuben, who was just getting started in a tiny delicatessen at Broadway and Seventy-fourth Street.

During the evening I went over to the table, and standing there was a curly-haired youngster whom I recognized as a stooge for Joe Cook, the famous vaudeville and musical-comedy star. The boy was eying the food as though he had never seen anything like it before. For several minutes he just stood and looked longingly at the delicacies.

"Aren't you going to eat something?" I asked.

"Oh, no," he said, backing away. "I'm just a stooge. This is for the stars."

"Nonsense!" I said. "It's for anybody who helps on this show. Dig in, son, dig in."

I've wondered many times since if that kid ever ate food he thought was better. I'm quite sure he never ate so much, even though he did one day have a restaurant of his own, and a famous one at that.

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One night, some years later, when I made my first trip to Hollywood, I was the guest of Sam Marx, the movie and television producer. We had dinner at the swank Chasen's Restaurant in Beverly Hills. After we had dined sumptuously we discovered there was no check.

"And what's more, Granny," someone said behind me, "as long as I have a restaurant you can't pick up the check." It was Dave Chasen, once the hungry kid in Joe Cook's act.

I remember another of those wartime benefits held in the Century Opera House. The Century was a rival of the Metropolitan, a huge theater seating about 4,500. We had a whole stage full of celebrities, stars such as Enrico Caruso, and I was master of ceremonies. The audience was the cream of New York society, and the house was jammed at \$25 a seat.

We had hardly gotten started when a thin little fellow with his chin on his chest began to pester me. "Please, mister," he said, "can I go on, too?"

"Go away, young fellow," I said, trying to give him an easy brush off.

"But, mister," he persisted, "I'm an actor, really I am. And I'm funny. I'm a very funny fellow."

"Look, kid, we got nothing but stars on this show. I can't put you on. Now beat it!"

But he didn't go away.

Benefit programs are all alike in one respect. The stars all want to do their stuff and get away—everyone wants to be put on first. Then, if the M.C. isn't careful, he's likely to be left with some bad gaps while he waits for some who promised to come but don't show up until the last minute.

Caruso was there early, but he was always obliging. He'd stay on and work all night if I wanted him to, but with a whole galaxy of stars promised for that evening I said, "Enrico, please, only two songs tonight."

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He grinned and said all right, he'd settle for two numbers.

Well, that was a big mistake. Caruso cut, and everybody who followed him cut, and the first thing I knew I had cut my throat. All of a sudden we ran out of performers. The stars on hand had finished and gone; the late-comers had not yet arrived. And out front sat a house full of \$25 patrons.

Suddenly I thought of the little pest backstage. Maybe, just maybe, he could fill in a moment and save the evening if not my life.

"Look, kid," I said. "You say you can entertain?" He bobbed his head up and down a couple of times. "Then get out there," I said, shoving him on stage.

He was the hit of the evening. Every star I introduced that evening just made a little speech, or, at most, sang a song or two, but that kid nearly broke his neck in his determination to make good.

"Kid," I said, when he came off amid a real ovation, "you were terrific. What's your name?"

"Jessel. Georgie Jessel. And thanks, mister."

It was the last time Georgie Jessel had to beg anyone for a chance to show what he could do.



# 6

## *Show Business in the Blood*

Marcus Loew, like most quiet, soft-spoken men, was slow to anger. But anyone who mistook his outward manner for a softness where business was concerned was likely to get the little end of the deal.

We had a contract with Paramount Pictures covering the last four days of each week. During those days we had to run their releases, whether we liked them or not. In the beginning this was probably a pretty good contract, since all studios were turning out about the same quality film, and it assured all Loew's theaters a regular supply. But as more and more producers got into the game, competition caused an improvement in the quality of films, stories became better, and the star system came into vogue. The public, becoming educated to better entertainment, demanded it. Furthermore, it had a very effective way of voicing its likes and dislikes. It just stayed away from the theaters showing poor films.

The first three days of each week our theaters could play pictures from any studio, and since we operated nearly 200 houses, this meant a pretty sizable business for any film that got in. Competition was keen for those three days and as a result we got some excellent pictures.

But the contrast between the first half of the week and the last when we had to show Paramount films was frequently

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the difference between business and no business. Some Paramount pictures were good, but there were also quite a few that were stinkers. And it was this occasional rotten apple in the week that spoiled the rest of the barrel.

Loew didn't like it when he was stuck with a poor film. I was beginning to wonder how long he was going to take it when suddenly, one day, he said, "I'm tired of trying to get good pictures from these people. I'm going to make my own!"

I was expecting him to say he was breaking the Paramount contract, but this announcement hit me like a bomb. "How's that, chief?" I asked.

"I've just bought Metro," he said.

Metro was then a fairly large movie company, with studios in Hollywood and on Sixty-third Street in New York. Max Karger, a friend of mine, was manager of the New York studio. I had visited the studio often to borrow stars from Max to present "in person" in our theaters. Some of the stars were Viola Dana, Bert Lytell, Lionel Barrymore, Clifton Webb, and Ina Claire.

A few days later he bought out Goldwyn and combined the two companies. Then he scouted around and found Louis B. Mayer, an exhibitor in Boston, to run the whole thing. He called the new organization Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. And that, simply, is how one of the world's biggest motion-picture-producing companies got started. And that's how my own burden of publicity chores was increased.

As the star system grew and people showed an inclination to turn out for a picture on the strength of the star alone, I asked myself this question: If they flock to a picture of a star, what would they do for a personal appearance of the star? I tried it, and it was immediately successful. Theaters were mobbed whenever a star was scheduled to make a personal appearance. Thus I introduced Maurice Costello, the elder

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Frank Keenan (grandfather of Keenan Wynn of movie fame today), Bert Lytell, Pearl White, the serial queen, Norma Talmadge, Tom Mix, and hundreds more. The first of the "glamour girls" I presented was Mary Miles Minter.

Mary was a beautiful, talented girl, very mature for her age and much too headstrong for her own good. She scored a tremendous triumph in *Daughter of the Regiment* when she was only fourteen. I met her soon after she finished this picture and arranged for her to make a personal-appearance tour in connection with it.

The big money hadn't rubbed off on Mary yet. She and her mother and sisters were living in a modest \$35-a-month apartment in the West Eighties, and their most tangible assets were pride and ambition. Everything they had went into their gamble on Mary. And, with a little help from me, it paid off.

It was about this time that the big fight between Zukor and Mary Pickford occurred and Mary left Paramount. There had been bitter feeling between these two, and when Mary left Zukor swore he would find a greater box-office attraction than Mary Pickford. I saw Zukor and told him about Mary Miles Minter. "She's got everything Pickford has and then some," I said. "She's beautiful, she's young, and she can act. Give her the right publicity build-up and she'll make you a fortune."

That was my line and I kept pounding it, and though there were a lot of candidates for the job, Zukor finally took Mary Miles Minter to Hollywood and starred her.

A year later she was back in town. Her mother telephoned me. "Granny," she said, "you've got to help us find a nice apartment." She asked me to get their car and drive them around town while they looked at several prospects she had in mind.



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Their car! It turned out to be one of the flashiest models available. Quite a step up from the subway, I thought. But I was even more surprised when they picked one of the most expensive apartments in town, a monstrous place just off Fifth Avenue, about where the Copacabana night club is today. It had half-a-dozen bedrooms and as many baths, and it cost \$600 a month. "Granny," said Mrs. Minter, "pick out your room."

I did a double take. "What?" I said.

"Pick out your room," she repeated. "You're moving in with us."

I could think of two or three reasons why I shouldn't, but any indecision I might have shown got wiped away when Mary turned on her charm. "We need you, Granny," she said.

Well, a man in the house might be a good idea, I figured, and what the heck! Perhaps I had earned it. A little clover wouldn't hurt me.

Later Mary also presented me with a twelve-cylinder gasoline buggy. But trying to run those twelve cylinders on the kind of money I made was a pretty big struggle. I was never able to get all twelve running all together either. There were always two or three missing, or at least lagging behind the others. Nick Schenck needled me about it. "Whose bank you robbing these days?" he'd say.

Movie celebrities were soon in such demand for personal appearances that I was constantly on the lookout for any new star whose name got in the headlines. Norma Talmadge was one of these, so it was inevitable that Norma and Joe Schenck should eventually meet. They fell in love and were married and Joe helped Norma set up her own producing company. It was a successful match in every way, but there was one who considered it a most unfortunate thing.

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One of the movie celebrities I had been trying to get for several months was William S. Hart. This was at the time of his greatest success, when he was making nearly \$10,000 a week. Any theater that got him for a single appearance was lucky indeed. We finally got him to appear at the opening of our Myrtle Avenue Theatre in the heart of Brooklyn, and when I say that two or three thousand people filled the street and lobby, in addition to a full house, you can imagine the popularity of this sad-faced cowboy.

The box office of the Myrtle Avenue was one of those portable things that rolled out on wheels. It was taken out front each day and rolled back into the lobby at closing. The crowd at the opening was so big that it just pushed the box office right out into the street. By the time it reached the middle of the trolley-car tracks, the cashier inside was screaming bloody murder. It took half-a-dozen ushers to get it back in place.

So I had a real attraction on my hands at that opening, but in spite of his triumphant debut, Hart was bitter and sad, as we talked in his hotel room that night.

"Cheer up," I said, being facetious. "It won't last long."

But Hart was much too serious to be joked out of his mood.

"I don't know why I'm doing this for you and your organization," he said. "All you ever did was bring sorrow into my life."

I remembered. William S. Hart was reportedly in love with Norma Talmadge. We had had her on a personal-appearance tour and she had married one of our executives.

Hart was always, on and off the screen, the strong, heroic type. In all his pictures the fade-out inevitably showed him kissing his horse while the girl rode into the sunset with a younger man. His producers were always careful to cast him as the "good man," but always losing the girl at the finish.

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There was sound business reasoning behind this. Hart was about forty then and definitely not the lover type. Casting him as the love interest would have been as credible as the fat lady of the circus playing the lithesome chorus girl.

But it was no melodrama Hart was playing that night in Brooklyn. "Norma Talmadge was my love," he said. "If you had never had her on your blamed personal-appearance tours she might never have met Joe Schenck," and with that the tears began to stream down his weathered cheeks.

As it turned out, Hart's blighted love probably affected his good judgment. Not long afterward he gave up his enormous salary and announced that he would make his own pictures. He was tired of playing the loser, in life and in the movies. He would make a film that showed he had other talents.

Eventually, Hart brought out his first film. No intelligent exhibitor would show it. The strong, silent cowboy had turned out to be the gay lover. Frankly, it was more emasculation than osculation. It was distinctly woeful. I don't think it was ever shown publicly.

Hart's hatred for Joe Schenck remained an unquenched flame. Later he brought suit for \$200,000 charging that Joe had prevented Hart pictures from being shown in Loew theaters. Through the years, egotism and misjudgment finally destroyed his career. The theater has had many Western stars, but never a sadder one than the middle-aged cowboy who never got the girl—in real life or on the screen.

But if these were sad days for some, they were certainly anything but that for me. What with movie people, vaudevillians, and Broadway characters, I had collected quite a circle of friends by the end of World War I. I was becoming much too popular and my parties too noisy to continue imposing on the Minter family, so I rented a modest two-room



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apartment on West Seventy-fourth Street. And there, every Sunday evening, I held open house for my assorted friends. Sometime during the evening Ted Lewis was sure to drop in. The Marx brothers, all together or singly, Harry Richman, Buster Keaton, the sad-faced comic, and Bert Wheeler all were regulars. I remember little Viola Dana, the film beauty who was just beginning to be known, shrinking down into the false fireplace one evening to avoid being crushed in the crowd. It was a noisy, zany, friendly gang and I was the happy extrovert responsible for much of their success. I seldom ever thought of the frightened, skinny kid who was so lonesome after his first month on Broadway that he was ready to flee back to Providence. I was with an organization that was growing by leaps and bounds, and I felt I was a part of it. Show business was in my blood, but, more important, I was doing big things in show business.

One day Loew walked over to the window of his office in the Shanley Building at Forty-fifth Street and Broadway and pointed across Times Square. "See that corner over there?" he said, indicating the corner where the Bartholdi Inn still stood. "What would you say if I told you our new offices are going to be right there?"

"Great, chief," I said, for I knew his big dream was to have an office on Broadway, over his own theater. "And a theater, too?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, and smiled that golden grin of his.

In no time at all the wreckers started wiping from the Broadway scene one of its memorable landmarks, the old Inn, where the hard-up chorus girl and the out-of-work actor could always find a soft spot in Mama Bartholdi's heart.

The Loew Circuit had never been able to have a theater building of its own on the Broadway that its founder loved.

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But in 1921 Loew opened the big 3,500-seat Loew's State and it became the pride of Marcus Loew and the key link of his chain. It stands today a monument to a modest little man who was unique in the universal love and respect he received, and richly deserved, from all of show business.

# 7

## *You Mean This Thing Really Works?*

Anyone who got around town as much as I did would have made a good reporter. As it was, I provided a lot of the material used in the columns of the day. My beat was all the Loew theaters in Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx, and New Jersey. I saw them all at least once a week and frequently all of them three or four times. And if there was any spare time I occasionally dropped in at some competitor's house just to keep a line on what they were showing. As a result I ran into a lot of extracurricular news that had little or nothing to do with show business. Passing these items along to reporters and columnists made a lot of newspaper friends who were always glad to reciprocate when I had Loew publicity to put over.

Sometime in 1922 I heard rumors that a new entertainment medium was catching on out in Pittsburgh. They were calling it "radio." A few months later I was visiting the DeKalb in Brooklyn one night when the manager said, "Hey, Granny, you want to see something interesting? Our electrician backstage has a gadget that you hold over your ear and you can hear things in."

"What kind of things?" I asked, only mildly curious.

"Music and voices and things like that."

"Oh, a new kind of phonograph?"



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"No, this music comes through the air. Come on, I'll show you." He took me by the arm and we went out the stage door and around the corner to a little hole in the wall where the electrician, George Schubert, was operating a queer-looking tangle of wires and black glass bulbs. He was speaking into a metal cup that hung by a wire in front of him. While he talked the manager whispered to me, "He's sending his voice out over the air. People all over town are listening to him."

"Yeah?" I said.

Schubert caught the skepticism in my voice and turned round. "Want to try it, Mr. Granlund?" he asked, pointing to the metal cup.

"Sure," I said, and I thought, well, if this guy wants me to make a monkey out of him, O.K.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I said, after Schubert introduced me, "I don't believe anyone can hear me, but if this thing really works, give me a ring. The telephone number here is . . ." and I gave them the number of the manager's office.

By the time we got back to the theater the manager's phone was ringing. In the next few minutes I got twenty or thirty calls from people as far away as Newark.

"We heard you, Mr. Granlund," they all said, and I was flabbergasted.

All the way back to Manhattan that night I kept thinking about George Schubert's gadget. I had more busy wheels going round in my head than George had in his hole in the wall. The next evening I was back, determined to give this thing a real trial.

"What can you send out over this thing?" I asked.

"Any sound you can make, Mr. Granlund," said George.

"Music and songs and things like that?" I asked.

"Sure. Anything."

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The next question that popped into my head was what kind of audience one could reach with this thing. How far away and how many people? George let me have the metal cup (he called it a "microphone") and I announced that I would pay \$10 to the listener who telephoned me from the longest distance. Again I was amazed. One fellow had heard me from a little place over in Jersey nearly thirty miles away. I was convinced.

I was busy at the time with four different amateur shows I was running simultaneously in different theaters. One of them, I remember, was in the Orpheum and one of the contestants one evening was a pretty little Irish girl who said her uncle was Billy LaHiff, the famous Broadway restaurateur. I knew Billy, so I put her on. She was a hit. She was only fourteen then, but she went on to fame and fortune a short while later. She was Nancy Carroll, one of Hollywood's top stars in the twenties. Her daughter has done all right, too.

So from these four amateur shows I picked ten performers, all different, for the real test of George Schubert's radio machine. I had an accordion player, a singer, a piano player, and a quartet, and three others whom I've forgotten. I took them all over to Schubert's little studio and made an announcement over the air. I told the listeners that this was to be an amateur contest. "We'll give prizes to the performers whom the listeners pick as the best," I said. "Will everyone send in post cards voting for their choice?"

Three days later the floor and every available inch of space on George's tables were covered with stacks of post cards and letters. Now the wheels in my head were really going round. I was fascinated with this new electrical marvel, not from the mechanical angle, nor even the entertainment potential, but because I thought of it as an excellent medium for disseminating publicity concerning Loew's theaters. I started to talk it

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up among Loew executives. They had more objections than a porcupine has quills.

"Costs too much money," was the argument most often heard.

Loew was the most indignant. "What do you want to do, put us out of business?" he asked. "You'd be encouraging something that could ruin the theater." (Does that remind you of any talk you hear today?)

I had one ally in the whole executive office. Charlie Moscowitz was on my side. He had the vision to see tremendous potentials in radio. He and I together finally convinced Nick Schenck that one couldn't hold back the sea by waving at it. Radio was here to stay and it was going to grow. Eventually Nick and Loew gave us the green light and we bought Schubert's little station. This was in 1922, and we got it, the station and all its equipment, for the magnificent sum of \$100 a week for ten years. This was the beginning of radio station WHN, for years one of the mightiest independent stations in the nation. Today it is WMGM, a fifty-thousand-watt powerhouse, owned by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Charlie Moscowitz engineered the deal.

There was only one logical place for us to broadcast from, and that was the new Loew State Building, on Times Square. We moved the whole outfit over from Brooklyn, but that wasn't so much of a chore as it sounds. The entire sending apparatus was about the size of an office desk. The generator could almost be carried by one man. The mechanical end of this new station was tucked into one end of our office, an antenna was raised on the roof, and we were in business.

Later we built a shack up on the roof and put the machinery on the roof, too.

We partitioned off a little one-room studio and hung it with flannel drapes. We sealed the windows and left only one



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door open. That was our studio, and it was just large enough to hold a small orchestra and an announcer, nothing more. Entertainers, when they began coming round, stood in the halls while waiting for a chance to go on. Visitors, too, suffered the same inconvenience.

With all the windows and doors sealed, it was pretty difficult to work in there for very long. Actually, we soon knew from experience that fifteen minutes was about the maximum, so we began cutting the programs into fifteen-minute intervals. That was the start of the standard radio time in use today.

Our station was putting out its programs on a feeble five hundred watts, and no one was sure how good it was. In those pretube days there was no receiver anything like what we have today. Practically all the sets in use were small crystal sets which most people made at home. One listened through headsets or earphones.

Since no one in the Loew organization knew anything about radio, and I didn't either, the job of managing the new baby naturally fell to the one who showed the most interest in it. I was elected. It had been pretty much my project from the beginning, anyway. So I became general manager, announcer, booking department, program director, and general factotum. I ran everything but the machinery.

The things that went on at WHN in those early days would not be believed by anyone who wasn't in it. It really was one of the darnedest hassles I ever experienced. Some of the programs we put on, for instance, were about the craziest thing you could list under the heading of entertainment.

One of my closest pals at this time was a piano player named Harry Richman, who had a good singing voice and a good line of gab. I met him first when he was playing the piano for Mae West. One Sunday afternoon, after his matinee

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at the RKO-Colonial on Sixty-sixth Street and Broadway, Harry came over to my place. The usual boisterous gang was there and they began needling Harry about his act.

"Why, Harry," they said, "all you do is beat that piano for Mae West. Why don't you do something on your own? You're as good as she is."

They kept this line up all afternoon. Finally, when it came time for Harry to return to the theater, we all decided to go with him. Twenty or thirty of us made it and sat about half-way up in the balcony.

Mae West came out, followed by Richman, and they went into their act. Mae finished and took her bows and walked off. Then we began. "We want Richman, we want Richman," we shouted, and pretty soon the audience took it up, not knowing exactly what they were yelling for.

Harry, well fortified for just such a challenge, made a little bow of acquiescence as he stepped out of the wings and sat down again at the piano.

Well, if you were one of the fortunate few who heard Harry Richman that evening, you heard something to remember. Harry was magnificent. He sang something about "There's No Hot Water in the Bronx" and he banged that old stage piano until the ivories fairly jumped. We kept him at it for about fifteen minutes, and when he finally staggered off the audience stood and shouted.

So did Mae West. She fired him on the spot. And that was the end of Harry Richman's career as an ordinary piano accompanist. But it was the beginning of Harry Richman, café entertainer par excellence.

He got a job right away with Benny Leonard, the ex-light-weight champion, in a place called the Ringside Café. Harry called it an upholstered sewer (it was under a theater on Fiftieth Street and Seventh Avenue) and invented a collo-

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qualism that was both expressive and descriptive. He was at this job when I set up WHN.

One day, soon after we opened the studio in our offices, I called Harry and told him to come over. "Got something I want to show you, Harry," I said.

"What have you got?" he asked when he came in.

"A radio broadcasting station, Harry, look around," I said, waving a hand toward our magnificent setup.

Harry looked and he was fascinated from the start. "You mean this thing really works?" he asked, repeating almost word for word my question when I first saw George Schubert fiddling with it over in Brooklyn.

Well, radio and Harry Richman were married that afternoon and they had a long, happy, and prosperous union. Harry was getting \$75 a week at the Ringside. He played and sang for two or three hours nearly every evening on WHN, and he did it for nothing.

But Harry was like that. Back in the days when I had to scrounge for talent to open a new theater, Harry Richman was always to be counted on. His devotion paid off. When stations got around to paying for their programs, Harry Richman was on top.

Having had no previous experience in this thing, I was a little doubtful of what it might mean to me. I decided at the beginning to conceal my real name. If I laid an egg, I wanted to lay it anonymously. I identified myself only by the initials N. T. G. It created a lot of curiosity. And one morning I opened the New York *Evening Journal*, and there was this headline, "N. T. G. leads in Popularity Poll." It was the first time the initials ever appeared in print.

Nick Schenck's attitude toward the station was that it was some kind of toy for me. He had no receiver, and neither did any of his friends. It wasn't until this bit of publicity ap-



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peared in the press that he began to take anything but a casual interest in radio. One day he said, "Well, Granny, looks as if you're getting to be popular with this thing. Why don't you give them your name?"

But in spite of occasional office pressure and the constant stream of requests from listeners and newspaper people, I steadfastly refused to divulge the name of the man behind the initials N. T. G.

I was still holding out a year later when RCA ran a newspaper poll for city-wide radio honors. The winners were announced in a big radio affair in Madison Square Garden. And the winner? N. T. G.

Well, I thought, so this thing looks like it might be a hit. In that case I'll tell 'em my name.

Except for a few regulars, Richman, Morrissey (Will, one of the most brilliant ad-lib comedians I ever knew), Fisher (John Irving, a sad-faced piano player with a dead-pan humor), and me, the entertainment on WHN was catch as catch can. We announced that anyone who wanted to try radio should just walk in. There was neither opportunity nor time to hold auditions, so when anyone came in and said he was a singer or a comedian, or played something, we put him on without further question.

However, I kept the studio pretty well filled with friends who were thoroughly experienced in entertainment and a lot of talented newcomers I had discovered in my theater shows. That is why the average entertainment on WHN was of considerably higher quality than the average in competing stations. Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor dropped in from time to time and I put them on. It was the first time either had appeared on radio. Song pluggers, vaudeville actors, and amateurs clamored to get in. A dark-eyed beauty named Helen Morgan came over from Billy Rose's little Backstage Club,

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where she was earning \$60 a week. A young song writer with his first big song got a chance to try it on WHN. He became famous later as Jimmy McHugh. And an acrobatic dancer who dreamed of becoming an actress, or maybe even of being a star, came in frequently to recite poetry for us. She said her name was Ruby Stevens. She is now Barbara Stanwyck.

I remember one evening along in 1923, when I was having a little difficulty throwing together a program, a vivacious youngster walked in. She had a mass of tightly curled hair and a very businesslike air about her.

"I would like to sing on your station," she said, without any preamble.

"O.K.," I said. "You sing."

"Don't you want to hear me first?" she asked.

"No, I'll take your word for it," I said. In those days it didn't make much difference whether they were good or bad, as long as they made a noise and filled in the gaping time void facing us each broadcasting day.

We had time for a little conversation while waiting for her to go on, so I asked her what she did. She was a stenographer for Caleb Bragg, she said, and she earned \$35 a week. Well, I knew yachtsman Bragg (from my early sailing days), so we had something in common. And with this little bond of confidence she admitted that she had never sung professionally, and wanted to find out if she was any good.

Good? Well, she was terrific, and she has been ever since. When she came off I said, "By the way, what's your name?"

"Ethel Merman," she said.

"Well, Ethel," I said, "you can sing on my radio station any time you feel like it."

She smiled, and next week she was back. And pretty soon it got to be such a nice habit that we put her on Tuesdays and Thursdays every week and there she stayed for a whole year.

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We got to calling it "Ethel Merman Time," and publicized it, and she became the first scheduled performer, the first regular fifteen-minute time segment we ever plugged.

I tried several times to get Ethel to take a regular job in show business or at one of the many new night spots around town, but she wouldn't give up the security of her secretarial job. I offered her \$100 a week at the Frivolity Club, which I was running at the time, but she refused. Then John Steinberg asked me to produce a show at the Roman Pools Casino in Miami Beach. I offered Ethel the star part in this show at \$300 a week and she took it. She never went back to her typewriter. Later I introduced her to an agent friend of mine, named Lou Irwin, and he became her real mentor and guide and was her manager for many years.

Le Roy Prinz, one of the top choreographers in show business, and an amazing guy, bossed the dances on that show.

I could go back into the files of my mind and recite a list of first appearances on radio for half the stars of today. A great many got their first chance on WHN. I've enjoyed watching them succeed.



## 8

### *What a Night to Remember*

Do you remember how some of the subtitles in the old silent films used to read? "Next Day," and "That Night," and "The Happy Home," were brief but they kept the story moving and saved a lot of film. And do you remember the one they used to show with the early slapstick comedy films that said "A Busy Day at the Office"? The scene that followed always showed the hero hopping all over his desk, clerks and secretaries whizzing back and forth as they sprinted to carry out the boss's orders, and all of it creating the general impression of a whirlwind on the screen.

The only difference between that scene and my office in those days was that mine was 3-D with sound. I used to think that the telephone on my desk had a bell that was fixed so it would ring the moment I put the receiver down. What with general promotion to push for Loew's theaters, special openings to publicize, and programs to dream up and execute, I had a pretty busy day. The only thing that remotely resembled my office was the city desk of a big newspaper just before press time.

By midafternoon the work had shifted from theater programs to radio programs, but no letup in the office routine marked the switch. Work ended only when the radio station signed off at midnight.

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People were constantly coming in and breaking into this routine, people from my own organization, friends and acquaintances from show business, newspaper people, and candidates for our radio programs. One day a young fellow came in whom I recognized as the male member of one of our vaudeville two acts. It was a husband-and-wife team called Winchell & Green, and I remembered it had appeared at Loew's American Roof in 1918. Winchell sang and his wife did an eccentric solo dance. They earned perhaps \$125 a week, when they worked. His act was not particularly good, but it was attractive enough to get him in a few small theaters and finally into Loew's. But it was a precarious living at best.

There were so many acts in those days, and performers then were not protected by the unions and trade associations as they are today. You had to be better than good to work steady, and many often went hungry.

In those days the sidewalk in front of the vaudeville "throne room," the Palace Theatre, was always crowded with actors out of work who dreamed of stardom, while they borrowed from each other. The term "cake-eater" got its start here, for these unemployed actors frequented Yohalem's Restaurant below Loew's State Building where they could get a big piece of cake for ten cents and a cup of coffee for a nickel. It was a meal for most of them, and that is why they were called cake-eaters.

Young Winchell was one of these cake-eaters, for I had seen him there from time to time, but he was a very ambitious fellow. He got a part-time job with *Variety*, reporting vaudeville news, and then one day he came in to see me.

"I've got a new job, Granny," he said. "I'm assistant editor of *Vaudeville News*. I'm going to write a column in it and they're paying me \$25 a week."

"Well," I said, "that's swell." The *Vaudeville News* was a

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house organ published by the Keith-Albee outfit. "What can I do to help?"

"I need material for my column," he said, "and I wondered if you could give me a few ideas to start on."

"Be happy to," I said, "but I'm too busy to talk to you right now. Why don't you just hang around and listen, maybe you can pick up a few items that way."

Well, as I said, I was really busy, what with the radio business, theater publicity, and helping on Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer promotion problems, and I kept the telephone receiver propped against one ear while I banged away at the typewriter.

Walter sat there patiently and listened. He sat for an hour or more, and jotted down notes on everything that happened. He picked up a little note now and then from a phone conversation, and an item or two from some visitor who came in. Pretty soon he had a notebook full of material without any help from me.

It's well-known history now how Winchell went from the *Vaudeville News* to Bernarr MacFadden's ill-fated tabloid, the *New York Graphic*, and eventually to Hearst's *New York Daily Mirror* and world-wide fame. But when he changed over to the *Graphic* from the *Vaudeville News* he expressed some hesitancy. It was a bigger job, he said, and he would need a great deal more material than just show-business notes. He had to have news about the celebrities everywhere, in all the professions, and in society, too.

Prohibition was in force and night clubs were just beginning to catch on. Speak-easies, as we called them, were the first ones to become really popular and society people and show-business figures patronized them. They offered the best possible source for items for Walter's column.

But the people who ran the speak-easies didn't want pub-



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licity either for themselves or for their clients. Publicity for them was dangerous and unprofitable. They insisted on complete anonymity and were very tough about keeping the names of their clubs and their clientele out of the papers. Most of them flatly barred newspapermen at the door. Any who did manage to sneak in were lucky if they weren't caught and thrown out.

I knew most of the operators in Manhattan, was even helping some of them line up talent for their floor shows, and in complete charge of production in others. There wasn't a "speak" where I didn't have entrée. But when I tried to get them to let my newspaper friends in, they refused.

I knew from experience that fellows such as Walter Winchell could be trusted to be discreet, to report only the news.

"That's all they want," I argued with the club owners. "Just news. They won't mention your places."

Larry Fay, the tough bruiser and notorious bootlegger who owned one of the clubs (whose show I was producing, as I will explain later), didn't want newspapermen at any time. But I kept pressing him, and he finally relented. And through my intervention most of the big shots in the racket eventually agreed to my proposition and gave the newsmen a break. Walter soon won the friendship of Fay and Owney Madden and Big French De Mange and a great many other beer barons and cabaret impresarios. And so far as I know he never once violated their confidence. Many of his columns, even today, reflect the friendships that were made back in those days. I have the greatest admiration for him, and it is my proud boast that we have been staunch friends through the years. He has become an international figure, with loyal friends in high places everywhere. He is an important man in the lives of millions, but most of all he is a great newspaperman.

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It is quite possible, also, that I am the one who introduced Walter to Damon Runyon. I knew Damon long before I met Winchell, and I think that somewhere along the line when the latter was beginning to make headway in the journalistic field I brought them together. In any case, the three of us were together a great deal in those days. Another young fellow who made it a foursome was Mark Hellinger. Mark was a reporter on the New York *Daily News*.

I saw more than one Runyon story in the making, more than one of Walter's columns before it saw print, and provided many of the tips that made Mark a star reporter.

For some reason, geographical or mechanical, WHN in those days was strongly directional in so far as its reception was concerned. Toward Westchester County, northward, we were rarely heard, but we discovered we had a very strong beam eastward into the Atlantic. We did not learn about this for quite some time, however, and in circumstances that were peculiar, to put it mildly.

After I had proved to the night-club owners that my journalistic pals could be trusted, I began to see more and more of them or their henchmen around WHN. In fact, they even sauntered into our studio occasionally and requested me to read certain poetry. I often read poetry, Kipling or Service or Poe (I was a whiz with "The Raven") in the lulls when performers failed to show up. But it always puzzled me when these big tough guys asked me to read it.

Then one night I was passing one of the clubs when I heard someone speak my name.

I turned and recognized one of "the boys," one of Larry Fay's rumrunners. I had talked to him before and he had told me how they met the boats from Newfoundland or Nova Scotia or Bermuda out beyond the three-mile limit and in

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high-powered motorboats ran the "stuff" through the coast guard patrol to their warehouse in Hoboken. "Hi," I said.

"Been meanin' to tell ya, kid," he said, "how much we like your poetry. Me and my crew go for that stuff."

It didn't make sense. The picture of a crew of tough rum-runners making with Poe or Kipling or even Robert Service was about as incongruous as lace panties on a gorilla. "How come you guys go for poems?" I asked.

"We got to like it," he said. "That's how we listen for Fay's signals."

I was stunned for a moment. Then things began to dawn on me. Larry Fay had been using me and my radio program to signal his men when the coast was clear. I never heard anyone recite "The Shooting of Dan McGrew" or "The Raven" after that without remembering that WHN's signal was heard more than three miles out to sea.

One day Marcus Loew called me into his office. A dapper young man was sitting beside his desk. "Granny," he said, "I want you to meet Senator James J. Walker. He's a friend of ours. He represents the motion-picture business in Albany. He would like to become mayor of New York. I thought we might use our radio station to help him in his campaign. Will you talk it over with the Senator and do everything possible to further his cause?"

So Jimmy and I sat down in my office and went over his campaign plans. He planned to make the first announcement of his campaign before a luncheon of the Press Club, he said, and I got the idea that we might be able to broadcast his speech by remote control. I checked with the various line operators in the city and finally leased a line from Western Union.

Any who remember that speech by Jimmy Walker may recall how loud he was. I had coached him for hours trying



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to get him to lower his voice a little. But he was of the old William Jennings Bryan school of public oratory and it was several weeks and several speeches later before he got used to radio microphones. Anyway, it was another historic event in radio, for so far as I know it was the first remote-control broadcast.

Beau James and I got to be pretty good pals before this campaign was over, and the stories I could tell about our escapades would fill another book. I'm glad to see Bob Hope has done a movie version of his life.

By the end of our second year in broadcasting we had compiled a notable collection of "firsts" in radio. Ours was the first amateur show on the air, preceding the famous Major Bowes' by several years. We had the first audience-participation show in a thing called "Country Store." We put on the first newscast and, heaven forgive us, the first commercial. We inaugurated remote-control broadcasts from night clubs and from a political forum. And I was half of the first air-to-ground radio communication team.

I cannot say exactly when I first became interested in flying. I recall one summer when I flew all over New England on a barnstorming trip with Jack McGee in a Burgess-Wright biplane. And while I was still in high school I was the "bomb dropper" for Claude Graham White, the great English aviator, during a big air meet, one of the first, held near Boston. The contest rules said that a pilot must be accompanied by a "bomb dropper" and White was looking for one. Most of the planes of that era couldn't get off the ground with more than the pilot, so this was a special opportunity for me. I took the train, forty miles and ninety cents, to Boston and applied for the job. White looked at me and figured I was skinny enough and light enough to qualify and hired me. The bombs were paper bags filled with flour.

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But a few months later I lost my interest in aviation when I saw my friend Jack McGee dive to his death into the shallow water and mud of Narragansett Bay. This flying business is just a little too risky, I thought.

However, a few years and several aviation improvements later, when I was in New York, the old lure of flying came back. I became friendly with Casey Jones, then head man at Curtiss Field out on Long Island, and his pilot, Captain Arthur Caperton, a former marine pilot. In this company I had some wild adventures in aviation.

One day I was out at the field attending a publicity party some press-agent friends of mine were staging in connection with the launching of the new Fokker 12-passenger plane. I had brought along my usual contingent of pretties to lend "atmosphere" to the event. Some twenty or more local writers and newsmen were on hand also, and it was my job to take them up and lecture on the fine points of the plane. I remember telling them that the plane could practically stand still in the air, and that seemed logical when we were up 5,000 feet with a head wind and the motors throttled down to about fifty miles per hour.

In the midst of the festivities I got a long-distance call from Enoch "Nucky" Johnson, political boss of Atlantic City. Nucky held complete power over every inhabitant of the resort city and particularly the cabaret business. "Look, Granny," he said, "how about flying down here this afternoon and judging a beauty contest?"

I said, "O.K. Shall I bring the contestants?"

"Sure," he said. "The more the merrier."

So I told Casey, and he gave me a plane, an old Curtiss-Wright and Art Caperton to fly it, and we loaded it with girls and took off. Nucky occupied almost the entire sixth floor of the Ritz Hotel in Atlantic City and as we came in

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sight Art said, "Let's let him know we're here." Whereupon he flew the ship right past the sixth-floor windows, between the Ritz and the Ambassador.

We landed on a stony field at the edge of town where Nucky picked us up, and then the fun began. It didn't mean much to me, but it was a real picnic for Caperton, who loved to frolic. Nucky's only spare bedroom at the moment was crammed to the ceiling with cases of liquor, mostly champagne. Since this was the only place he could put Caperton for the night, maybe you can imagine how the pilot felt when he learned that this was his bedroom. I am not a drinking man (nor do I smoke either—my mother's stern influence, no doubt), so I am no judge of Caperton's delight.

I returned to New York the following morning, but Art stayed on as a guest of Nucky Johnson for as long as he wanted.

Another time Art and I flew down in an amphibian and landed on what was then known as Brigantine Beach. Coming back, we spotted Casey Jones playing golf on a field on Long Island and Art flew right at him. Casey had to fall flat on his face to avoid being decapitated.

It was in this mad period that I became acquainted with many of the officers at nearby Mitchel Field. One particular pal of mine was Lieutenant Ed Hutchison. He was the pilot who was later court-martialed for flying a De Havilland so low over Washington Heights that he tore radio aerials off rooftops and chased a policeman behind a billboard. Another was Lieutenant Sam Connell.

One day these two came to see me in my office in Loew's State Theatre Building. This time it was serious business they wanted to talk about.

"Granny," said Connell, "we have a new commandant out at the field and he is interested in working out some method



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of radio communication from air to ground and vice versa. His signal corps boys have come up with a sending and receiving apparatus which will fit in a De Havilland, but we need help. Can we borrow your radio engineers? They know more about these things and we thought you'd like to give us a hand."

Well, as far as I knew, speech between a plane and the ground had never been accomplished, but I didn't see any reason why it couldn't, and I certainly would like to be in on the experiments, I told them.

I took the two lieutenants in to see Nick Schenck and explained what they wanted. Nick readily gave his consent and made arrangements for Bill Boetcher, our engineer, to work with the signal corpsmen. Bill helped install the new sending and receiving set in the De Havilland and I went along to watch.

But the most avid spectator of that operation was the airfield commandant, a Major Henry Arnold. He was a very friendly guy and we soon found our interest in the radio project was a common bond. It wasn't long before I was calling him "Hap" and he was calling me "Granny."

When the set was installed, I agreed to go up as the broadcaster. Lieutenant Hutchison was the pilot. Major Arnold laid strips of white cloth, about three feet wide and twenty feet long, on the grass near the take-off point and set up another sending-receiving set nearby. The cloths were our signal system, as I shall explain later.

The De Havilland was equipped with a 400-horsepower Liberty motor, one of the noisiest engines ever invented. It was mounted in the nose and directly behind it sat the pilot and behind the pilot was a small round stool. This is where I sat. The cockpit was open. In order to get away from the slip stream and avoid some of the noise of the motor, the me-

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chanics had cut the stool down until my head was just under the cockpit. I was held in by stout chains across my lap—fastened to a belt around my waist. I couldn't see out unless the plane was tilted almost upside down. I wore earphones (there was no such thing as a loud-speaker yet) and a bright green silk shirt. The day was hot and sultry.

I climbed in and someone fixed the safety chains. We took off, and the next hour was sheer horror.

We circled for a moment at low altitude and I, crouching over the set in the hot confines of the cockpit, threw the switch to "send" and yelled into the microphone, "If you can hear me, please take away a white sheet."

Since I couldn't see over the side, I had to poke Hutchison in the back and signal for him to tilt. And tilt he did. I almost fell out of the plane. The only thing that kept me from it were the chains.

I got a quick look at the field as Hutch circled, but the three sheets were still there.

Well, we kept this up for what seemed hours. I could hear nothing through the earphones, probably because the noise was so terrific. Every time we'd straighten out I'd yell, "If you can hear me, take away a sheet." Then I'd punch Hutch, we'd go into a turn, and tilt, the chains would snap tight, and I'd be deathly sick.

We kept up this routine until I felt I simply couldn't stand another second of it, and then, suddenly, Hutch went into a half loop and yelled. I couldn't hear what he was saying but I looked in the direction he was frantically pointing and there, by golly, a white sheet had disappeared.

Hutch put the ship on an even keel again and I crouched over the seat. "Hurrah!" I yelled. "One sheet is gone. If you can still hear me take away another one."

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We tipped again, and to my unbelieving eyes another sheet was gone.

Years later I was operating a big cabaret show at the Florentine Gardens in Hollywood when I was called on by a committee of young lieutenants from March Field about sixty miles from town. They had seen a big aviation number I was putting on, with the chorus girls forming the body and wings of an airplane, and they wanted to borrow the girls and the number for a special occasion at March Field. "The general commanding all aviation is coming to visit the field and we'd like to entertain him with this show. Can you arrange it?"

Of course we could, and about noon on the appointed day we started for March Field. Our arrival there was marked with more gaiety than I'd seen around an army base in some time, and at four o'clock we put on the show.

In the front row, of course, sat all the brass and in the middle, enjoying it more than anyone, was the white-haired visiting general.

After the show I was introduced to him. He held my hand for a moment, looking at me, and then he said, "Don't you know me, Granny?" I was obviously puzzled and a little embarrassed by my puzzlement. He chuckled at my discomfort and then said, "I'm Hap Arnold, you darned fool, from Mitchel Field."

Then while I pumped his hand in delight, he turned to the assembled brass. "Maybe I ought to tell you," he said, "this man helped me get credit for being the first to establish two-way communication from the ground to an airplane. He did the work and I got the credit." And with that he let out the same jolly laugh that I remembered from those eventful days when we were pioneering in a new field in radio.



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And we really did finally establish two-way communication. Hap Arnold and his engineers and our Boetcher kept plugging away and about ten days after our first try at Mitchel Field we made another attempt. This time Hutchison and I flew over Times Square in big circles at about 500 feet above the top of Loew's State Theatre Building where our station WHN was located.

The idea this time was to have the station pick up the voice from the air and rebroadcast through our system so that the folks at home with their single-tube sets and "cat's whisker" crystal sets could, for the first time, hear a voice from the air.

The top of Loew's State Theatre Building is flat, and as we circled about, I could see a large crowd gathered on the roof. It was a hot day, and one man in the crowd was conspicuous in a white shirt.

As we circled I called down, "If you can hear me, will the man in the white shirt kindly go from the north corner to the south corner of the roof."

To my great surprise and delight, the white shirt moved over as directed.

Then I said, "If you can still hear me, will the man in the white shirt please go back to the other corner."

He did, and this went on for an hour. Everything I said was rebroadcast. It was a sensation. It made radio history.

It also made me sick again. When we landed I had only the shreds of my shirt left. It had been torn off in the slip stream. Then it was that I discovered who the man in the white shirt was. He was the owner of the cafeteria in the basement of the building and he was so exhausted from running around the roof in the heat that he was ready to boil me in his soup. He made a big sacrifice for science and the advancement of civilization and I tried to point out something of this to him, but he couldn't see it that way. He was very mad at me.

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The engineers kept working, and a few days later we tried another experiment.

Nick and Joe Schenck owned Palisades Amusement Park, high on the Palisades, across the Hudson from 125th Street, as I mentioned. When Nick discovered that radio could be a tremendous new medium of advertising they built a small station on the grounds of the park and called it WPAP. We decided that we could cash in on a little publicity in the next experiment, that of two-way communication, if we held the trials in connection with this station.

With Lieutenant Brown as pilot and Lieutenant Sam Connell as "talker," the old De Havilland took off from Mitchel Field at night. We planned to carry on a two-way conversation which we'd broadcast over WPAP and over a loud-speaker set up in the park. A throng of some 4,000 people were on hand in the park to witness the event.

Nick Schenck, who had paid little attention heretofore to my screwball activities with radio, was standing beside me in the darkness that night waiting for Sam's voice. There was a moment of tense drama and then I heard, coming through my earphones and through the loud-speaker, the voice of Sam Connell.

"Hello, Granny, " he said. "I hope you can hear me. I'm flying down Broadway now." It was one of the biggest thrills I ever experienced.

"We get you, Sam, but it sounds impossible. Can you come over here and let these people see you?"

"O.K.," said Sam. "I'm at the Battery now. I'll be right over."

Nick Schenck, I could see out of the corner of my eye, was practically holding his breath with the excitement of it.

In a moment Sam's voice came in again. "I'm coming up

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Broadway, Granny, and I'm at about 125th Street now. You can spot me because I have a red light on my tail."

Immediately a roar went up from the tense crowd, and then out of the darkness over the river came the small red light. Connell was flying at about 200 feet above the ground.

I yelled to the crowd to give three cheers for the intrepid airmen who were making history that night and I held the microphone toward them as I led the cheers.

"Did you hear that, Sam?" I asked, turning the mike back.

"I sure did, Granny," he replied. "Thanks, folks." I could see the happy grin on Sam's broad face. Then he spoke again. "Granny, I'd better head for home. Will you please call up Mitchel Field and ask them to light the oil barrels?"

This was before the era of night flying, remember, and landing fields, even army fields, were lit, if at all, with a double row of oil barrels along the runway. I called Mitchel Field and one of Hap's boys said, "O.K., Mr. Granlund, we heard Sam through our radio here at the field. The barrels are being lit."

That was the beginning of two-way communication between airplanes and the ground. So you can understand my pride when General "Hap" Arnold publicly acknowledged my part in the historic event.

My interest in aviation and my friendship with Casey Jones were to bear fruit in another way a few years later. They enabled me to chalk up the journalistic scoop I mentioned earlier in my story.

Other flier friends of mine, George Noville, Richard E. Byrd, and Bert Acosta, were preparing to fly the Atlantic non-stop to Paris. They were tuning up a big tri-motored plane they had named the *America*. There was some talk about taking me along as radio broadcaster—Byrd had been offered \$10,000 by the *New York Times* if he would broadcast hourly



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bulletins as he flew toward Europe. But I turned down the invitation. I simply didn't know enough about the technical side of radio to qualify for such a job and I recommended, instead, that they take a Norwegian friend of mine named Bernt Balchen. It was a good choice as events later proved, for Balchen's great skill brought the ship in out of a dense fog and landed them safely on a beach in France.

One day while watching the preparations for this trip, Casey Jones introduced me to a tall, slender flier from St. Louis.

"Meet Slim Lindbergh," said Casey. "He's going to try to fly the Atlantic in a Wright-powered Ryan monoplane."

I discovered right away that the young flier had Swedish ancestors and this, together with our mutual interest in aviation, got us off to a friendly start. He showed me his little plane, *The Spirit of St. Louis*, and he seemed pretty confident of success.

I was there the next morning when Lindbergh took off in the cold and the haze and headed out across the Atlantic.

The newspaper coverage of this flight has never been exceeded by any other single event. And the morning after his return the newspapers devoted more space to him than they have ever used on any other individual. Never in the history of New York had there been such excitement.

And in all the excitement the welcoming committee managed to foul up the arrangements and cause a lot of heartache. A group of twenty of America's top fliers, under Captain Tom Lanphier, an old friend of Lindbergh, was scheduled to fly as honor escort in the reception celebrations. Through some oversight on the part of the committee, Lanphier and his buddies were not included in the banquet given Lindbergh. In some attempt to make up for the committee's neglect, I

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invited Lanphier and his fliers to be my guests at the Frivolity Club.

Casey Jones dropped in later and told me he had to pick up Lindbergh the next morning at 5 A.M. and drive him to Curtiss Field. Lindbergh planned to borrow a Curtiss ship, he said, and fly to Washington. There he'd get his *Spirit of St. Louis* and fly back to New York in time for a luncheon engagement at noon. He asked me if I'd like to go along, and I jumped at the chance.

It was cold and rainy the next morning at five o'clock when we rang the bell at Harry Frazee's apartment at 270 Park Avenue where Lindbergh spent the night. A motorcycle escort was waiting in the rain and a few curious early risers were standing in doorways hoping to get a look at the famous airman. Lindbergh came down in a moment, looking refreshed and happy. Casey Jones had a little broken-down coupé and the three of us squeezed into the front seat.

The motorcycle men had a tough time in the rain and on the slippery streets, but we made Curtiss Field about six o'clock. Casey realized the risk in attempting to fly in such weather and he began to stall. The plane wasn't ready yet, he said. But when he tried to advise Lindbergh, tried to talk him out of making the trip, he refused to listen.

Lindbergh soon became impatient with Casey and insisted that we drive him to Mitchel Field, the army air base a few miles away.

But he didn't have any better luck over there. The young major in charge wasn't sure how he should take Lindbergh's demand for a ship, and in his uncertainty he stalled, too.

Lindbergh was furious.

"We fly in worse weather than this all the time with the air mail," he said, and added a few assorted opinions about army fliers. Taking my arm, he said, "Let's get out of here."

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We eventually gave up and returned to the Frazee apartment.

Throughout the morning, going to and from the airfields, Lindbergh talked freely of his historic flight and disclosed details that none of the newspapers had covered. In his brief interviews with the press he had given out practically nothing about the actual flight. I was enough of an ex-newspaperman to realize what a terrific scoop was tossed into my lap, and I lost no time making use of it.

I called a friend, a good rewrite man on the staff of the *Evening World*, and talked for an hour. The *World* hit the streets a few moments later with its first afternoon edition and my story was plastered across the front page in big type. No other paper had a line of Lindbergh's trip to the airfields, or the details I had gathered of his transatlantic flight. And, most important to me, the by-line read:

By Nils Thor Granlund  
Director of Publicity, Loew Theaters

During the day Phil Payne, editor of the tabloid *Mirror*, phoned me and asked for another story. I had enough material to do another version and again I got a by-line.

That night, when both the *World* and the *Mirror* were out, with "Loew Theaters" prominently displayed in the by-lines, I met Marcus Loew. I never saw him so delighted. And well he might have been, since no other theater outfit ever cashed in on such an important news story.

Late in 1924, as a result of my interest in boxing and my following among sports fans on the radio, I was signed to describe the boxing bouts in the St. Nicholas Arena. I had been a boxing fan and enthusiast since I was a kid. I'd done considerable amateur boxing and I'd had some pretty good



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teachers. One of them was Jem Driscoll, the mighty Welshman. I was six feet tall and skinny and weighed only 125 pounds, but I rated featherweight and I got a lot of experience. Later I had seconded fighters, managed them, and written about them. I handled Frank Mantell, the shifty German-American from Pawtucket, when he fought Frank Klaus for the world middleweight championship in 1911. (He lost.) I thought I had a pretty good insight into the sport.

My fight broadcasts that season must have been better than average because when the big middleweight championship set-to between the incomparable Harry Greb and the Rumson Bulldog, Mickey Walker, was staged in Yankee Stadium on July 2, 1925, I was named to do the blow-by-blow broadcast. Between rounds my pal, Paul Gallico, the writer and then sports editor of the *New York News*, did the résumé.

That fight was one of the highlights of my life. The fight was so dramatic that translating the action from ring to loud-speaker was easy. Walker took a bruising beating through the first twelve of the fifteen rounds and seemed to have no chance to win.

At the end of the twelfth round one of Greb's seconds leaned far over the ropes toward my microphone and yelled, "Walker has asked Greb to carry him!"

Translated, this meant that Walker asked Greb to let him stay to the finish of the fight, not knock him out.

In spite of the damage he had been inflicting, the truth was that Greb's knockout punch was practically nonexistent. He had superb boxing skill but he lacked a killing blow.

For a second I was in a quandary. If I ignored the remark, it might be accepted by my listeners as a statement of fact. I decided to tell the audience just what happened. "Ladies and gentlemen," I said. "The voice you just heard came from one of Greb's seconds. It was not my voice." And I added my

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opinion of anyone who would make a statement like that. "Everyone who knows Mickey Walker knows he'd never make such a request. He wouldn't ask Greb or anyone else to carry him, because he is not built that way."

And to prove it, Mickey came to life after the twelfth round and in the last three heats he staged one of the most dramatic comebacks I have ever seen. He clobbered Greb from rope to rope. At the finish, however, Greb's early lead was so wide that he won the decision and the world title.

Jack Kearns was Walker's manager, the same Doc Kearns who piloted Jack Dempsey in his heyday and who now has a small "piece" of Archie Moore, who has had his eye on the heavyweight throne in recent years. Kearns at that time, however, had run into trouble with the New York State Athletic Commission and was prevented from attending the Greb-Walker match. He spent the evening sitting in a corner of Billy LaHiff's Tavern on Forty-eighth Street, with a radio beside him, listening to my broadcast.

Everyone in the business gathered at the Tavern after big sporting events in those days and I came in with Gallico. We nodded hello, and without warning, Kearns rose and swung at me.

"Whaddaya mean saying Mickey asked Greb to carry him?" he snarled.

"I didn't do anything of the kind, Jack," I said. "Didn't you hear me tell the audience it was someone in Greb's corner that said it?"

But he wouldn't cool off until Mickey himself came in and explained it to him. I guess radio reception in those days had its faults, or Jack had had a little too much to drink. Anyway, Mickey patched it up, but he was still seething over the incident when Greb came in. Walker and Kearns both jumped on the champion.

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"I wouldn't ask you to carry me if I was dead!" yelled Mickey. "And besides, I can lick you the best day you ever had!"

Well, that started a brand-new fight, or rather continued the old one in a new locale. Mickey and Greb stepped outside and went at it all over again, right on the street. It's hard to tell who would have won that one if it hadn't been for Paul Gallico and myself and a few others who succeeded in pulling the belligerents apart and stopping it.

But what a night to remember! It made sports history and it made me a popular prize-fight announcer.



# 9

## *Of Fame and a Comfortable Fortune*

One morning a big six-foot-three lantern-jawed, beefy-handed character came into my office on the top floor of Loew's State Theatre Building. Everything about this guy was flashy and splashy. His clothes were expensive, to say the least, and radically different from anything the average man would wear.

"I'm Larry Fay," he announced, as he took the seat beside my desk, then with an air of studied casualness went on. "I got the whole second floor in this building, and I got taxicabs."

Of course I recognized the name. Fay Taxicabs was blazoned on the door of the second floor of our building. And his cabs were all over town, too, ornate vehicles that reflected their owner's taste. They sparkled with nickel trim and extra doodads such as musical horns. They bore a black swastika trade-mark on the side.

"I'm going to open a night club," he continued, "and I want you to be the master of ceremonies."

"You got the wrong boy," I said. "I'm not an M.C., and I'm not an actor. I'm the press agent here, and I run this radio station."

"You're a good M.C., too," he said. "Hell, boy, I heard you last night and you're a great master of ceremonies."

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He was referring to a benefit program that Georgie Jessel and I had put on the evening before. Georgie was interested in the widow and children of some deceased actor friend of his and had asked me to help him put over the benefit program. It had been a good program and we were sure it would be successful in raising a lot of money for the widow. I had no idea it would also catapult me into a new business.

"I'm gonna build a spot for high-class people," said Fay, "and you're gonna be the M.C." Obviously, he had ambitions to be a big shot on Broadway. I had heard that he had an interest in liquor and the night club would be an ideal setup for him. I didn't know until later, though, what an ideal setup it was. When I learned the true story of Larry Fay, some months later, all these things fit together like a perfect jigsaw puzzle.

Fay grew up on the rough and tough West Side, where the Irish tough guys put the muscles on him and dock-walloping on the piers gave him his diploma in the school of hard knocks. When he was old enough to drive and big enough to hold his own with other cabdrivers he bought a taxicab and went into business. One day, in the spring of 1920, he got a fare that wanted to be driven to Montreal. The guy flashed a roll of bills and Fay took him. It was a momentous trip and the turning point in Fay's career.

In Montreal he learned that he could buy a case of good whisky for as little as \$10. He bought two cases, with the profit from his trip, and when he got back to New York he discovered he had no trouble disposing of the liquor for \$80 a case. Larry Fay had struck gold.

Before long he had several cabs and a couple of trucks and he was running liquor across the border in considerable quantity. By 1922 he had an organization that was netting him about half a million a year. His taxicab business had be-

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come one of the most powerful in New York, his strong-arm guys having secured all the preferred spots at the bigger hotels and railroad stations. And his fleet of rumrunning boats and trucks kept a steady flow of liquor coming into the city.

Although there are people who won't believe this, Larry Fay didn't like bootlegging. After he had made a pretty good pile he got out of it and out of the taxi business also. He still put his finger in assorted shady operations from time to time, but he always had a yen to be respectable and hobnob with big names. There was a certain desperation in this desire of his, I was to learn, and his plan to open a night club was part of it.

However, I wanted no part of his proposition. The M.C. spot in a night club held no appeal for me. I was busy with my job for Loew and the radio station, and I was happy. Furthermore, I'd had a couple of brushes with the cabaret business and I had not been particularly impressed with my possibilities in that field.

In the summer of 1920, for instance, show business had hit a slump and chorus girls and other small-time talent were being laid off in droves. Things were becoming pretty rough.

One day I got a call from a chap named Murray who had a cabaret in the basement of an old hotel on Forty-second Street near Seventh Avenue. He called it Murray's Gardens. He asked me if I would supply the girls and put on a show for him. Despite the fact that most of the girls who worked in cabarets were prostitutes, I thought of Murray's offer as an opportunity for some of our unemployed chorines. I figured if we laid down a rule that none of the girls in the show would be permitted to mingle with the customers and we paid them fairly, there was no reason why any of them had to stoop to prostitution.



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I picked the girls carefully, hired a director to stage numbers, and we opened with some of the same kind of publicity I used to get for *Hanky Panky*. It turned out to be a wonderful summer, even though I lost one of my girls and, to all practical purposes, one of my pals.

Damon Runyon was a frequent customer at Murray's Gardens, but I soon began to realize it wasn't my company he was interested in. One of our featured dancers was a young lady named Patrice Gridier, and it was she whom Damon came to see. Eventually they were married and we lost one of our most beautiful dolls. And I didn't see Runyon around so often after that.

My other experience up to this time as a night-club entrepreneur was as a partner in a restaurant called Gypsy Land. It began as an eatery, though, and not as a cabaret, and it was an outcome of my frolics with Singer's Midgets.

In the days when I was exploiting the little people, they always enjoyed eating in a Hungarian place called Gypsy Land, way over in the East Seventies. It was a typical little Hungarian place, with an elegant menu, but no matter what you ordered, you always got goulash. It was owned by Mr. (the waiter) and Mrs. (the cook) Schwartz. It was patronized by neighborhood Hungarians (frequently in native costume) and I never heard of the place until the midgets introduced me to it.

One night after a star-studded show at one of our theaters, I thought this picturesque spot would be a novel place to take some of the celebrities for supper. In the group were Joe Fehar and Texas Guinan. Fehar was a Hungarian, and a favorite violinist among New York society folk. My guests were fascinated with the place. In fact, Gypsy Land proved such a hit that we decided then and there to go into business with

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the Schwartz couple, we to provide the clientele and split the profits fifty-fifty.

Within the week you couldn't get into the place. On a Saturday night chauffeured limousines lined up for half a block, while bejeweled ladies and top-hatted gentlemen enjoyed themselves inside. One evening, it was said, Harry F. Sinclair, the oil millionaire, spent \$2,000 in the place. The restaurant's entire stock of food and liquor and fixtures weren't worth that when I first saw it.

The place never had had professional entertainment but after I became interested in it, I saw to it that there was always something to entertain the customers—and it never cost Gypsy Land anything. There were plenty of top show people who were always willing to get out on the floor and strut their stuff for the fun of it. But in the end it was just this very feature that caused the downfall of our booming little business.

Happy-go-lucky Tom Mix was in town on a personal appearance tour and this was at the time he was pulling down \$10,000 a week in Hollywood. Tom was a handsome guy, and a bit on the show-off side, such as wearing holstered guns in public, but he was a lovable character, nevertheless. Texas Guinan invited him and some of his cowboy friends to supper at the Gypsy Land. What with the food and the free-flowing wine and the exuberant spirits of the gang, Tom decided to unhinge his artillery and show the folks something of his marksmanship.

Unfortunately, the neighbors in the rooms above and the dwellings next door didn't appreciate his talent. They called the cops and Gypsy Land was out of business quicker than you could say it. Tom Mix had the honor of closing as picturesque a spot as New York ever saw.

Gypsy Land had been so successful, however, that a short



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while afterward Texas, Joe Fehar, and I got together again with Mr. and Mrs. Schwartz and moved Gypsy Land over to Forty-fifth Street in the Broadway belt. We reopened it again but as a high-class dining room only. It soon became a rendezvous for everyone in show business, but I bowed out of it after a while because it was just one more thing to interfere with my regular work.

It was not long after these experiences that Larry Fay dropped into my office with his proposition, so I was not only not interested in the cabaret business, I just didn't have the time. I had been bitten by the show-business bug, but acting was not my dish. The business side of the entertainment industry, promotion, production, management, I enjoyed. But I never wanted to be an actor, and an M.C. was an actor.

So I was pretty definite in my answer to Fay. "No," I said. "Thank you, but I'm not your guy." Then, when I saw the clouded look of disappointment cross Fay's face, I knew I'd better think of a good substitute suggestion. And suddenly I had a brilliant idea. Texas Guinan was the answer, in more ways than one.

Texas was working for a couple of Greek speak-easy proprietors named John and Emil in a fashionable spot they were operating on the second floor of a building on Fortieth Street, right below the Public Library. They called it the Beaux Arts and it attracted the very best people in town. They hired Texas to act as a sort of hostess, and with her charm and wide circle of friends she had practically made the place. She had never done anything resembling M.C. work in her life, but she was booming business for the Greeks.

One day I suggested they put a show together to back up Guinan and thus increase her prestige in the club.

"Go ahead," said John, "that's a good idea." So I rounded up a bunch of Ziegfeld's prettiest and put together a nice



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show. We rehearsed a whole week, ordered costumes, and were about set to go on when John said, "We don't want it."

Well, we had no contract, just the man's word. As a matter of fact, I never had a contract with anyone who worked with me throughout that era. And I never had any trouble with the hundreds of performers who worked in the shows I provided the cabarets, or in my own places later. And that instance with John was the only time anyone ever went back on his word.

I was furious. Not only did the partners go back on their word to me and the girls, but they had made a fool of Texas and embarrassed me before Ziegfeld.

"What happened?" Ziegfeld demanded. And all I could answer was, "The fellow didn't want it."

So when Larry Fay came in looking for an M.C., I had a brilliant idea—how I could take the Greeks' meal ticket away from them, do a big favor for my friend Texas, and get back in the good graces of Flo Ziegfeld. I explained what a nice setup I had with Loew, how much I liked my work, and how in this capacity I could be more help to Fay's projects than I could working for him. Then I told him about Guinan's setup at the Greeks' Beaux Arts, and how much better qualified for the job she was than I.

"Besides, if you can get her," I said, using a little sales psychology, "she'll bring the business along with her."

He wasn't convinced, but he did agree to visit the Beaux Arts with me that night and see for himself.

We dropped in about eleven that evening and he saw Texas go through her paces. He was impressed. And he was impressed also with the décor of the club. "Wow! What a swell joint this is," he exclaimed, wide-eyed, when he first saw it.

I called Texas over to our table and introduced her to

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Fay. "This guy," I said, "wants to open a cabaret, a swank night club, with the kind of entertainment we planned for this place. And he wants you in the top spot in it."

I hadn't asked him to commit himself definitely, but as I talked I watched him out of the corner of my eye and I could see him nodding agreement with everything I was saying.

"I like the way you work," he said. "I like you. Now what I got in mind is we'll open a joint and call it the El Fay Club. You come in and I'll give you 50 per cent of the profit, up to \$1,000 a week. That's your ceiling."

Texas accepted on the spot and they shook hands on it. It was the only contract she ever had with Fay or anyone else in all her cabaret operations, so far as I know. I was so delighted with the setup that I agreed to go along as producer of the show at \$150 a week. I figured I could handle it in my "spare time."

We found a place on Forty-sixth Street, east of Broadway. There was a big restaurant on the ground floor but upstairs, on the second floor, was a small saloon. During Prohibition it had become a speak-easy. It wasn't much of a place, but we were relying on Texas' lure and her ability to bring in the "right" people (those with money and social position).

The place was tiny. It seated only about 80 customers, if we hung some from the ceiling. One entered it by a narrow stairway and a yard-square landing on the second floor. Here was the entrance door and the inevitable peephole. The stairway continued to the floor above where we built a lounge and a dressing room for the girls. And here they had to see their friends and relatives. From the very beginning I insisted that no girl was to be allowed to sit in the audience or mingle with the customers. It was a rule I followed ever after. In all my years of running night clubs, girls employed by the club were never allowed to mingle with the trade. If a girl's

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mother or family, or her husband or boy friend, came in, she had to get permission to sit with them. Even down to more recent years, when Yvonne De Carlo was a dancer in my Florentine Gardens in Hollywood, and her mother came in, I insisted on this rule.

The El Fay show was nothing but girls. I got together a chorus of six, there wasn't room for any more, and rehearsed them. Beautiful Irene Delmar was picked to lead, and Pearl Eaton, sister of Mary Eaton of Eddie Cantor's *Kid Boots* fame, was one of the principals.

And Fay promptly fell wildly in love with Irene Delmar. From then on most of the money he took out of the El Fay he spent on her. And he made plenty. The money came in so fast that night after night he would walk up to the cashier and say, "Give me a thousand," or "Give me two thousand," for next day's spending money. And this, mind you, from a band-box that could accommodate no more than 80 customers at a time.

A couple of months after we opened a kid of about fourteen walked in and asked for a job. She was pretty, but she sure looked like someone who needed a friend. The heels of her worn shoes were badly run down, and her dress looked as though it had been through many washings. But she had feet that twinkled like the stars when she danced. She rated a top spot right away and I put her in as the leader of the chorus. That was the beginning of Ruby Keeler's skyrocketing rise to fame. Within a few weeks she was the toast of Broadway and it wasn't long before Hollywood beckoned.

Meanwhile, I expanded my interest in cabaret show business and about a year later, while I was staging a show at the Pavilion Royal on Long Island, I got a call from Al Jolson.

The Pavilion Royal was a popular roadhouse operated at that time by Christo and John Steinberg, the same team that



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had run Reisenweber's fashionable restaurant in the old days. I gave a show at the Pavilion Royal every Sunday night for three years. Ruby Keeler had played there awhile before she graduated to Hollywood, but I made no connection between that fact and Jolson's call. Al was on top, king of show business at that time, while I had almost forgotten Ruby. So his call came as a great surprise to me.

"Listen, Granny," he said. "I'm in town with Ruby Keeler, and we're going to be married." That about floored me. Then he added, "Ruby wants you to be the one to announce it."

Ruby got on the phone then and verified all that Al had said. "Yes, Granny," she said, and there was a lilt to her voice I had never heard before. "And we want to come out to the Pavilion tonight and announce our engagement there."

Well, that was a publicity feather for the Pavilion the like of which even I couldn't have dreamed up. I got hold of John Steinberg and between us we called every newspaper in town. Jolson and Ruby made their appearance, and Al sang a song. It was a memorable occasion and the song made history. Jolson had just finished his second sound picture, and although his first was not yet released, he was already getting a terrific publicity build-up about it. Al Jolson sang the song "Sonny Boy" from his first sound movie that night, and it was the first time he ever sang it in public.

Ruby was seventeen when she and Al were married. She zoomed to movie stardom on her twinkling toes, and then, while still in her twenties, she chucked it all, Jolson, the movies, dancing, and left the limelight to marry a poor guy and have four kids. Love is a wonderful thing.

But getting back to El Fay and our first "speak." The girls who worked in our shows came to work at eleven o'clock; the first show was at midnight and there were performances then every couple of hours until 5 A.M., when the girls were off.

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Most of them were Ziegfeld girls who worked all evening in the *Follies* and the rest of the night for us. It was a tough schedule, so we tried to make it as easy on them as possible and that is one reason why we fixed up the lounge for them.

Food at the El Fay was practically nonexistent. Customers might order an occasional sandwich, but they didn't come there to eat. They came to drink and be entertained. The profits were in the cover charge (two bucks a head) and liquor. And buying it (whisky, for instance) at \$10 a case and selling it at a buck a watered-down throw (about a hundred in a quart), you can imagine the enormous profit in such a place. I never knew much about Fay's cost-profit setup, because I never then or afterward had anything to do with that end of the business. Where he got his liquor supplies, where he kept them, and how much he sold were Fay's business. Mine was the production of the shows, and we kept them completely apart.

Thus, in this second-story bandbox, financed by a bootlegger and spiced by the rollicking personality of Texas Guinan, was born that incredible period in American life immortalized by Damon Runyon as "The Era of Wonderful Nonsense." It was a bacchanalian feast, a Roman orgy, a politician's clambake, all rolled into one.

Nothing made much sense. Practically everyone ordered champagne (cider spiked with alcohol) at \$25 a bottle. And the most incongruous figure in all this was Larry Fay himself. Although one of the top gangsters, he never permitted any of his cohorts to mingle with his customers. He made them stay out of the place. The only one of his mob he permitted around El Fay was Tommy O'Neal. Tommy was Fay's right-hand man. And of all the fellows who worked for him, he looked less like a hoodlum than anyone. He was pale and anemic-looking. He was always very respectful toward the



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girls, and if anyone made a pass at them he had to settle with Tommy. Once I saw a young fellow grab at Ruby Keeler as she passed him on the landing. Tommy's right shot out, and what a surprising wallop he packed! The guy never knew what hit him as he bounced and rolled down the stairs.

The cabdrivers who hung around the front of the place were also employees of Larry Fay and they always knew what to do when someone came rolling down the stairs. They picked him up and carried him to Sixth Avenue and deposited him in a gutter. When the police found him later, the case had nothing to do with the El Fay.

But Texas herself was the spark plug in all this. "A fight a night or your money back!" she promised. And "Give the little girl a big hand" was her favorite exhortation to applaud her entertainers. But the trade-mark that made her famous was her "Hello, Sucker!" greeting for the big-spending customers.

For several months a nightly visitor was a portly grayed gentleman who insisted on spending all the money he could before he left the joint. He averaged about five hundred bucks a night and what he couldn't spend on pseudo champagne he would scatter among the girls and musicians. After a week of such splurging Texas' curiosity was aroused. She asked him what his business was. The gentleman gave her his card. It said he was a wholesale butter-and-egg dealer. From then on Texas singled him out for special greeting every time he came through the door. "Here's my big butter-and-egg man!" she'd yell, and seating him in a place of honor near her, she'd go on with the show. It wasn't long before Broadway and the rest of the country adopted the phrase as synonymous with profligate wealth. And a year later *Big Butter and Egg Man* became the title of a comedy on the legitimate stage.



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Texas played to the vanity of the free spenders, and as the evening wore on she'd spot each new arrival whose spending potential she knew and she'd invite each one to come down front and sit near her. Chairs would be brought forward and placed on the edge of the dance floor and by the time our second show went on there'd be only a small piece of the dance floor left to move around in. By three o'clock the dancing space was maybe about twice the size of a telephone booth.

This presented a serious problem in logistics for me. I especially remember the difficulties I had the night little Ruby Stevens made her debut. Ruby was an acrobatic dancer, and I had been watching her progress for some time even before she came to work at the Guinan Club (Texas' personality had gradually changed the name and hardly anyone knew it as El Fay any more).

One summer, as a publicity gag, I staged a "First Annual Outing of the Ziegfeld Chorus Girls" at the Schencks' Palisades Amusement Park across the Hudson. It was a good publicity getter for Flo and it didn't hurt the amusement-park business either. Ninety-two of the lovelies showed up and a gay time was had by all. It was such a success that I tried it again a month later with a musical-comedy show we had playing uptown. This time we had the girls all wear bathing suits and we traveled in open limousines. At the head of the line was a circus calliope in full blast.

Just as we were crossing Times Square, the lead car broke down, naturally, and the line of cars following it came to a halt. Just then the noon whistles blew, traffic from both directions began piling up, and bedlam took over.

It was the darnedest traffic jam I ever saw and the din caused by the car horns, the calliope, and the yells of the

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crowd could have been heard clear across town. Photographers appeared and I picked two of the prettiest girls, Ruby Stevens and a youngster named Mae Clarke, to sit on the front fenders of the broken car that caused all the trouble. (Remember the hullabaloo raised in the press a few years later when, in a movie, Jimmy Cagney squashed a grapefruit in Mae Clarke's face?)

When that musical comedy closed I came to know Ruby Stevens quite well. She had various jobs around town, she did an acrobatic dance at the Strand Roof, and she was in other shows, but she got in the habit of dropping in at WHN several times every week. She was interested in radio and particularly anxious to get some experience in dramatic speaking. I let her recite poetry in the lulls between our regular programs. One of her favorites, I recall, was Robert W. Service's "Coquette" and she did it very well, in a deep voice that showed great dramatic promise. She was intense, with a dignity and honesty not often seen in show girls.

It was probably very tough going for Ruby in those days. She was living with a sister in Brooklyn, and most of her scant earnings had to go for room and food. I frequently knocked off when she came in and took her downstairs to Yohalem's for some food.

One day Nick Schenck asked me to put together a vaudeville show for Loew's Metropolitan Theatre in Brooklyn, and I put her in it. She did an acrobatic dance which consisted mostly of rolling around on the floor, a few splits, and so on.

"Look, Ruby," I said, after watching her in rehearsal, "you're beautiful, so what's the sense of wasting it rolling around on the floor?"

"It's the only thing I know," she confessed. So the splits and the rolls continued as her specialty and she played club

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dates and wherever she could pick up a booking. When I began putting together shows for the night clubs, I hired her. Thus, when I produced the show at Guinan's riotous spot, it was only natural to hire Ruby Stevens and her acrobatic number.

But one night when Texas' "court" had usurped more than its usual amount of floor space, Ruby started into her act and promptly disappeared. We found her entangled in table and chair legs under one of the tables. From then on, for her own safety, Ruby had to confine her routine to a simple tap dance, something she could do within the space of a handkerchief.

There was another entertainer in our show there who managed to do a pretty good fast tap on the small stage. He was a slim, slick-haired fellow named George Raft. I hired Georgie for the grand salary of \$75 a week. I was later to see him able to spend that much on a momentary whim.

But there is a small sequel to the Ruby Stevens story you ought to know. One evening in LaHiff's Tavern I met a theatrical producer friend named Willard Mack and I mentioned Ruby as a good possibility if he were looking for talent.

"If you ever have a spot for her," I said, "she'll prove her worth. She has a great deal of talent."

Billy LaHiff joined in when he heard me praise Ruby Stevens. Billy was always interested in helping ambitious kids and more than one famous name today can remember free meals that he handed out.

It wasn't long after that that we heard Mack was casting for a play called *The Noose*. The lead role was that of a chorus girl who rose to emotional heights, a dramatic role that needed a chorus girl with dramatic ability, rather than an actress who could portray a chorus girl. LaHiff called Willard



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Mack. "That's the spot for the little Ruby Stevens that Granny and I mentioned to you," he said. "She can't miss."

Ruby studied hard and won the part. On opening night I lined up all my newspaper friends and they came, and saw, and were captivated. Ruby was excellent. The reviews next day proclaimed "Chorus Girl Steals Show," and Ruby Stevens was in.

That's about as far as my part of her story goes. You can supply the rest, for Ruby Stevens went on to fame and a comfortable fortune, and a place in the hearts of millions of movie fans as the beautiful Barbara Stanwyck.

If my memory serves me right, that same year that Barbara Stanwyck first clicked saw the spotlight of fame picking out other names: Paul Muni, under the name Muni Wisenfreund, was a hit in *We Americans*; Spencer Tracy became known for his role in *Yellow*; and lovely dark-haired Claudette Colbert captured our hearts in *The Pearl of Great Price*.

It was about this time, too, that the initials N. T. G. were becoming synonymous with beautiful girls. Beginning with vaudeville acts I put together for Loew's and branching out into producing shows for cabarets, night clubs, benefits, and the like, I was getting a reputation as the top talent scout in the country. Producers from all over came to me for girls, and even the great Ziegfeld came eventually to depend on me for much of his prettiest talent.

As a result, about a year after the Guinan spot opened every girl in town looking for a job sought my help. That is how one of the really fantastic Cinderella stories of show business unfolded in a cloudburst of tears in my office.

She was a gorgeous girl, with huge blue eyes, perfect features, and ripe, voluptuous lips. I was employing more than a hundred girls at that time, in night clubs, vaudeville, and radio, and this girl was easily the prettiest of them all.

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But she wasn't on our pay roll. I had never seen her before. And it's a wonder that I thought she was beautiful, for she was crying such a cascade of tears I could hardly see her face. Between sobs she finally managed to tell me her story.

Her name was Lucille LaSueur, she said, and she was working in the chorus at the Winter Garden. "I only get \$30 a week," she said, sobbing, "and my mother is sick in Kansas City. I've got to have extra work so I can make more money. The girls tell me you have lots of jobs in night spots. Can you give me work after my show at the Winter Garden?"

Obviously she would qualify in any show-girl job, but she wanted money, and quickly. Even if I found a place for her in one of my productions, it would take some time for rehearsals before she started earning money. Only one possibility came to mind. I knew Harry Richman was rehearsing that afternoon for a new show opening a few nights later. I called him.

"Harry," I said, "I got a girl here who's beautiful and she needs a job. Put her in your act."

"I don't need a girl in my act," he said.

"Look," I pleaded, "just let her sit on a piano or dance a Charleston or something. Give her \$50 a week and don't give me any argument."

"O.K.," grumbled Harry. "Send her over."

I hung up and turned to the girl. Her tears had dried up, the sun was shining through, and she was positively radiant. And it wasn't an act. The tears had been real and the happiness was, too.

But on opening day she was back, and so were the tears.

"Mr. Richman," sob, "insists," sob, "that I wear an evening gown," sob, "and I don't have any," sob, sob, sob. It was several minutes before I could quiet her enough to tell her I'd take care of that little detail. I phoned a big serve-yourself



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dress shop down on Forty-second Street and Broadway and told the owner, a friend of mine, that a girl was coming in with a blank check to buy a dress. I added that if the check was made out for more than \$20 the check would bounce.

Miss LaSueur dried her tears, bounced out of the office, and presently bounced back again with a package under one arm.

"It cost only \$14," she said proudly, stripping the paper off the package. I never saw anyone so excited about a new dress. She went to a corner of my office where a door opened back to hide a small space and immediately started to change into the new gown with the help of my secretary.

Meanwhile I stepped out of the office. And that was the moment that Marcus Loew chose to come in!

He was embarrassed, and I was confused, and the situation was further complicated by the fact that Loew was a shy man who would never understand such antics. I searched frantically for something to cover my confusion, to fix up the situation. Suddenly I remembered, and I reminded him that when he had bought Metro, he had asked all of us to be on the lookout for new stars to replace fading Metro names.

"Chief," I stammered, "I thought you'd like to see this girl dressed up. She might make a new star for Metro."

Loew grinned. "Take her over to Major Bowes and have a test made," he ordered. The Major was on the pay roll in those days as a sort of talent appraiser for Loew, and he ran the Capitol Theatre. Later he took my place in radio.

The girl opened with Richman, danced the Charleston as I had suggested, and generally decorated the place with her loveliness. After the show all the big butter-and-egg men in the place, plus the handsomest playboys, gathered around her and sought her attention. She searched the room around



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her and saw me sitting at a table in a far corner. "Granny." She waved, and the crowd around her opened and let her through. "Take me home, Granny," she said when she came over to me.

I saw a great deal of her after that. It wasn't long before her abilities were recognized and she was making about \$80 a week—good pay for a show girl. Meanwhile, several film tests were made, but invariably the word came back "No good." LaSueur herself said she wasn't interested in the movies and she had to be coaxed into every film test we made. But I persisted. I felt sure that she would click if she were given a real chance.

Finally, in some desperation, I telephoned Harry Rapf, a friend who had become a producer for Metro in California. "Sign this girl," I said, and I gave him about the same pitch I'd given Richman. He promised to do what he could.

We were having a Christmas party in Nick Schenck's office on December 24, when the Metro treasurer came in. "Granny," he said, "where can we reach Lucille LaSueur? Hollywood wants to sign her to a contract." He had been trying to locate her all morning, he said.

I told him she had gone to Kansas City to spend the holidays with her mother. The treasurer gave me a check for \$400 and instructions to get it to her for expenses, along with orders to head for the Coast. I wired the money and the message.

The day after Christmas we received this reply: "This is the happiest Christmas of my life. Leaving for California tonight."

I saw the beautiful Lucille hundreds of times after that but almost always it was her picture on the screen. In the few times we met in person she was always the warm, cordial girl

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I saw that day standing behind my office door in a \$14 frock. That warmth and friendliness are why, after all these years, everyone from prop boy to top film executive has only admiration for Joan Crawford, the cinema name of Lucille LaSueur.

# 10

## *A Poll Tax and the Parody*

There had been a few cabarets before El Fay, but few of them were little more than market places for sex. It was Larry Fay's flamboyant yen to hobnob with class and Texas Guinan's exuberance in luring the suckers that really got the night-spot trend started. That is, it was this combination, plus Prohibition.

The coming of Prohibition dispersed what my columnist friend Lee Mortimer called the pickle factories. Grand old places like Rector's and Reisenweber's simply could not exist without liquor sales. The wining and dining industry, therefore, was taken over by a new type and a new breed and was operated in the most unlikely places one could imagine. Polished cellars ("upholstered sewers"), old brownstone residences, and draped and curtained second-story flats were the most popular sites. Anonymity was the atmosphere desired, if not actually attained.

Competition was stiff, but rewards were tremendous. It was a setup made to order for mobsters. The hoodlums branched out and opened a number of "intimate" night clubs. In the end, they virtually took over the industry, lock, stock, and whisky barrel. It took plenty of money to set up a joint, with its garish fixtures, its illegal cellar, and its entertainment,



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and only the gangsters and professional gamblers had enough ready cash to invest in such swank places.

Technically, you were supposed to bring your own flask to such places, and the club supplied the setups of ginger ale or charged water and ice. But on those occasions when you forgot the flask, well, the club had a little liquor they could let you have. Besides, there was considerable difference between selling it by the bottle through the bootleg channels and selling it in the club by the drink. Several hundred per cent difference, in fact. And the customer seldom had to worry about such things as cops and the law. The owner of the club knew whom to see to guarantee protection from such nuisances, local or federal.

So these night clubs, nite spots, speak-easies, joints, and second-floor johnnies popped open all over the Broadway belt after Guinan's spot set the pattern. Texas herself ran two or three more of them after her first venture with Fay. She had the Abbey, back of the Harding Hotel, and the Club On Time (which she meant to name *Intime*, only her French was a little faulty). Among the others remembered from those torrid times were the Frivolity and the Hotsy Totsy, the Fifty-Fifty, the Silver Slipper, LaVie, the Plantation, Tommy Guinan's Playground and the Club Rendezvous, the Napoleon and Les Ambassadeurs. The hoods who owned the latter rued the name because they couldn't spell it. Practically all had one thing in common: the owners or the operators were gangsters.

The El Fay gave me my first good experience in putting on floor shows in such places and in no time at all I had a reputation among "the boys" as an impresario in the business. Before this new industry was two years old I had produced a dozen or more shows in competing cabarets. At one time I

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operated shows in six different clubs simultaneously and all of these places were owned by gangsters.

In those days if you wanted to do business with the night clubs you did your bargaining with gangsters; it was impossible to avoid contact with them. Anyone who had anything to do with show business in these places had to know gangsters, had to deal with the mob. They moved in about the second or third month of Prohibition. A great deal of the money they made peddling liquor was put into cabarets. These plush saloons not only provided a good place to invest their money, but they provided a profitable market for their liquid assets. Some of them angeled stage plays and musical-comedy shows. Many owned prize fighters and racing stables. They would back anything that had the element of chance in it. And they had plenty of cash to do it with.

Blondes, brunettes, redheads, male and female, stars and chorus girls and workers in the vineyards were all mixed up with the gangsters, whether they liked it or not. If you were in show business and you worked in a night club, the club was owned by a member of the fraternity, for only mobsters had the money to afford places big enough to have entertainment. Many of the greats of Hollywood and Broadway today came out of this mish-mash. And I was in the middle of it, from the beginning. I didn't have much choice, if I wanted to stay in show business.

It was rough and it was tough. Four of my employers, owners for whom I produced shows, were killed. One of the girls in one of my shows was shot and another was with a gangster when he was bumped off.

People today ask me how I managed to survive a daily routine of such contacts. Looking back on it from the quiet perspective of thirty years, I sometimes wonder myself.

Perhaps the answer lies in the type of service I gave them.



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They were, essentially, just a tough breed of businessmen, some being a little tougher than others, and all of them pretty careful to do nothing that would endanger their business establishments. The occasions when they had to call in a trigger-happy gunman such as Dutch Schultz, crazy Vincent Coll, appropriately named the Mad Dog, or vicious Legs Diamond, were all too frequent, but they were always careful that no taint of the crime brushed off on them. This meticulousness about their night spots included their treatment of their employees. We were all expendable, but the element of risk for the entertainer could certainly not be compared to the boys who "ran" the liquor across the line.

Call it honor among thieves, if you will, but they had a surprisingly high code of honor. In all the years I dealt with them, I never had a written contract with any of them. And I was never gypped or given a bad deal by a gangster owner.

Larry Fay called me in one day soon after my first production opened in his place, and said he wanted me to meet a friend of his. "Granny, meet Jim Redman," he said. "We own ships together, and we used to help each other out when we were longshoremen on the docks."

Well, I knew Redman by reputation, but I had never seen him. He was a huge broad-shouldered guy with the looks of a movie he-man. He operated a cellar café called LaVie on Forty-seventh Street and Broadway. It was not a hole in the wall by any means, but a plush, spacious place seating about 500 people.

But LaVie had an unsavory reputation as a hangout for the toughest thugs in New York. No respectable person would go into the joint. The gangsters had to have a place to hang out, and that was it.

One night some of the boys were resting in Redman's club when word came in that a rival gang was waiting in ambush



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outside. There was only one entrance and exit, the front door, and the boys inside were trapped. Redman took it upon himself to act as mediator in the dispute and for the next two or three hours he raced back and forth between the rival gangs trying to straighten things out.

Finally, the guys inside decided to make a break for it and come out shooting. Redman, still trying to pacify everyone, got caught in the cross fire but wasn't hit. The gangsters all disappeared, all, that is, except one. He lay in the gutter, dead. The police came and arrested the only living soul in sight, who happened to be Jim Redman. He languished in the Tombs for a few weeks and then was released for lack of evidence.

One interesting side light on this case was the part of it I saw. An hour or two after the shooting, and just as it was getting light, I came along the street with one of the girls from my show at El Fay. We saw the pool of blood and the fresh sand which the police had sprinkled over it. Diagonally across the street stood the Rivoli Theatre with a big poster out front advertising Rudolph Valentino in the film *Blood and Sand*.

The chorus girl, who knew nothing of the shooting, pointed to the blood and sand on the street and the poster across the way. "What despicably bad taste," she said. "What won't you publicity men think of next?"

So I knew the reputation of LaVie before I met its owner. "Granny," he said, when Larry introduced us, "I want you to come over to LaVie and do the same thing for me you've done for Larry. We ain't doing too good."

"That'd be a tough job," I said. "Your place has a bad name. It would take more than a show to put it on its feet." What I was thinking was that it needed a complete bath in strong soap and fumigation.

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"What would you suggest?" he asked.

"Well, I'd change the name, first. The name LaVie is dead."

"O.K., we'll change the name. How about calling it the Parody Club?"

"That's O.K.," I said. "But the place is known as a mob hangout. What can you do about that?"

"I'll clean the s.o.b.'s out," he promised.

We kicked it back and forth like that for a while and finally, on Fay's advice, I agreed to take on the job. There was another factor that had something to do with my decision, too. The LaVie had a large dance floor, and after El Fay's postage stamp I welcomed the opportunity to put a show on a real floor.

"But it will take money," I said. "You can't build a new reputation on top of the old without spending money."

"How much?" Redman asked.

"I don't know, but you'll have to have a beautiful chorus of about twelve girls, and a name that will bring in the customers. How about Ted Lewis's band?"

Redman admitted that he was nearly broke. The LaVie had been closed after the shooting and what little money he had he had spent getting himself out of jail. But he agreed to go along with my ideas.

Ted Lewis was riding the crest at this time and I knew if we could get him at any price it would pay off. I caught the train to Atlantic City, where Ted was playing, and over coffee in his hotel room the next morning I made a deal with him and his wife, Ida, for \$3,000 a week for two weeks.

On the same trip I hired Cliff "Ukulele Ike" Edwards as the featured single act for \$500 a week, plus twenty-five cents a head for every customer. It was an unusual arrange-

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ment, but Ike wouldn't come without that special poll-tax inducement. He knew the club's reputation.

I felt we needed one more specialty to round out the show and on the advice of friends in the business I hired a fellow who had never been on Broadway, and whom I had never seen. I hired him because of the stories I had been told about him.

Most of those stories are now available in a book entitled *The Joker Is Wild*. It is the story of Joe E. Lewis, an irrepressible pixie, who got his start in Chicago's fabulous gangland. And that's where he came very near ending it.

It was shortly after I began producing shows for night clubs that I first heard about this guy. He was the top attraction in the Green Mill, a Chicago hot spot owned by Yellow Kid Weil, notorious as the greatest con man of his age. Lewis was a comic, but he also had a voice that could qualify for the concert stage. He was unquestionably the most popular entertainer in the Windy City. Top stars, friends of mine such as Sophie Tucker and Harry Richman, who had seen him work, all gave me the same glowing reports about him.

"You ought to get hold of this guy," Richman told me one day. "Bring him to Broadway. He belongs on the big time."

El Fay and Texas were such a big success by this time that I felt we could afford to take on additional talent. But before I could begin negotiations with Lewis, I heard another story about him. This time it was blazoned across the front pages of all the newspapers. And from what I read it looked as though I'd never have the pleasure of introducing Joe E. Lewis to Broadway.

Joe E. Lewis was such a sensation at the Green Mill that he inevitably received offers to go elsewhere. One of them, an offer from the competing Rendezvous, was twice what he was getting at the Green Mill. Joe decided to take it, but



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the Green Mill's manager Danny Cohen and owner Yellow Kid had other ideas. "You'll never live to open," they said.

Joe opened in the Rendezvous, with bodyguards planted all over the place. And within the following week it was highly obvious that the move was good for Joe and the Rendezvous but something like disaster for the Green Mill. Knowing gangland policies, one could hardly expect the executives of the latter joint to take it without protest. "Machine Gun" Jack McGurn was called in to handle the "details" and Joe was attacked in his hotel room. They worked him over with knives and clubs and left him for dead. His face was ripped open from ear to throat, his head pounded into a pulp. How anyone could have been so thoroughly and systematically butchered and live is beyond the imagination. But Joe E. Lewis lived, though for weeks he teetered on the brink. The story of his fight for life belongs in the annals of the world's most indomitable men.

No one thought Joe would live, and certainly no one dreamed he would ever again perform before an audience. Months went by, and slowly, very slowly, he began to recover.

We were about ready to open the Parody Club when I got word that Joe wanted to come to New York. He had been advised to get out of Chicago. With Ted Lewis and Ukulele Ike as headliners, there was room to gamble with a Broadway unknown. I felt, too, that no matter what condition he was in physically, he had so many friends in show business that the least we could do was give him an opportunity to make a comeback. I hired him.

Opening night the remade club was packed with celebrities who came to see our great show and to pay their respects to a game little guy who refused to give up.

Joe's debut on Broadway was the most heartbreaking thing I ever witnessed. This comic with the once agile mind and

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quick quip faced an audience composed of friends and admirers, but the act was pathetic. He talked as though his mouth were filled with mush. He would start a joke, stop, and say, "I forgot." He would begin a song, and then forget the words.

Out front they were pulling for this wreck of a man to make good. They made the place ring at the end of each broken joke and interrupted song. The sight of Sophie Tucker applauding madly while the tears flowed down her cheeks was something I'll never forget.

Afterward I saw Joe in his dressing room. "You were great, fellow," I said. "You really fractured 'em."

"No, Granny," he muttered. "I'm no good. I just can't make it."

"Nonsense," I said, with as much assurance as I could muster. "You're O.K., and you're going to be better. This was just opening night."

Well, that was the pattern for show after show and it was weeks, really, before he began to show any improvement. Occasionally, friends from show business would drop in, and all of us did everything we could to keep him encouraged. I think some of us did a little praying on the side, too. Little by little, with infinite struggle, he managed to improve a bit with each succeeding performance. In time he hit the top again, and no one was happier about it than I. The comeback of Joe E. Lewis gave me one of the biggest thrills I ever had in show business.

In our original estimates we figured that if the Parody lost five or six thousand dollars in its first two weeks, we would still be all right. It was worth that much to dry-clean the LaVie. But the Parody showed a profit from the moment it opened. It was an instantaneous success. It never had an empty table. And instead of letting Ted Lewis go at the end

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of his two weeks' agreement, which was as long as we expected we would be able to pay him, he was signed on for twenty weeks more. And this in time was extended to more than a year!

And Cliff Edwards? Ike discovered a windfall in that head-toll scheme of his. I can still see him as he went around from table to table, mechanical counter in his hand, clicking it like a railroad conductor. And at the end of the week, when he got his check, his figures and Jim Redman's never jibed. Ike would stand pat on the total on his mechanical counter. Redman would insist that there was a lot of "ice" in the joint. ("Ice" in gangster parlance was anyone such as a Prohibition agent or a cop who came in on the house.)

Redman usually won out in these arguments. He had the size and the looks that commanded respect and brooked no petty disagreements.

Years later I saw a picture in Hollywood starring Burt Lancaster. It was produced by Hal Wallis. Not long afterward I was having lunch with Wallis at the Paramount Studio commissary and I mentioned having seen the Lancaster film. I mentioned to Wallis that Burt was a ringer for long-gone Jim Redman.

"Did you ever meet Burt?" Wallis asked.

"No," I said, "but I'd like to sometime, and tell him about it. I think he's a stand-out actor."

"Turn around," said Wallis, grinning.

Sitting back to back, his chair touching mine and listening to our conversation, was the star himself. "Thanks for the nice words," he said, smiling. "But we've met before, you know."

I searched my memory, but there was no file marked Lancaster. "I can't remember," I said, shaking my head.



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"Remember when you were master of ceremonies at a Masonic benefit in Philly about 1935?"

I remembered that.

"My partner and I went down there, we were getting fifty bucks for a perch act. My partner was underneath holding the pole, and I was on top doing tricks. We found out that because of the way the proscenium was built it would hide me on top. You got the idea of moving some of the orchestra men, and we worked in the pit, which gave us room. I'll never forget that you made it possible for us to get that \$50. Boy, did we need it!"

Almost directly across the street from the Parody was another place called the Silver Slipper. But while our cellar was packed nightly by our high-class show, the Silver Slipper was dying. They had four or five acts and no chorus, and no attraction worth the cost of a highball. There was no reason to go there when all you had to do was cross the street to the Parody and its array of entertainment stars.

The Silver Slipper was owned, off and on, by an assortment of Broadway characters. At that time the head man in the group was Bill Duffy, a famous Prohibition-era beer baron, who was the active manager. Another member of this combine was Frankie Marlowe, a Unione Siciliano mobster, prize-fight manager, race-track owner, and high-stake gambler. Johnny Wilson, whose real name was John Panica and who once reigned briefly (1920-21) as middleweight boxing champion of the world, and Harry Block, an easygoing character with underworld connections, were also in it. Some of these partners also were cutting into the Cotton Club, a red-hot Harlem spot that launched such greats as Lena Horne and Ethel Waters.

Duffy was disturbed over the Silver Slipper's doldrum. He looked enviously across the street where the Parody was

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turning them away, and he came to me and proposed that I join the Slipper and put on its floor show.

I had to turn him down. "I can't run two places side by side without an O.K. from Redman," I said.

But a short while after that I got into an argument with Redman over chorus footwear. The girls wore out a lot of shoes and I felt that footwear, the same as costumes, should be supplied by the management. Jim Redman didn't agree.

One word followed another until we both lost our tempers.

"I've got an offer to go over to the Silver Slipper," I said.

"Go ahead," said Redman. "That's O.K. with me."

The Parody was riding high by this time and they didn't need me as they had in the beginning, so I put on my hat and walked across the street.

# 11

## *High Dives and Low*

Broadway night life reached its peak in the Silver Slipper. Never before or since has anything surpassed it. Its career stands as the most fabulous portion of that free-swinging era. It was the most incredible, the most exciting of all the plush saloons of the Prohibition period. And it launched more stars than any similar springboard in the history of entertainment.

"The boys" gave me a free hand with the Silver Slipper. I bossed the redecoration of the place, refurnished it from top to bottom, and then put together the finest show I could dream up. I scouted the country for the prettiest girls I could find, and I decked them out in the fanciest costumes anyone ever saw. And I hired Frank Bannister to write a whole bookful of songs for us.

I had started the Parody off with a celebrity show, big names in the entertainment world, and depended on this alone to bring in the customers. I decided to try something different at the Silver Slipper. Once a week, on Friday nights, I'd have a celebrity program, when I would invite some Broadway star as guest of honor. Show people are always generous with their time when they can help others in the same business, and I counted on this to make our celebrity nights gala affairs. For the regular shows on all the other nights I decided to try something different also. Instead of



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depending on some name band or big-time entertainer to draw the crowd, I figured the customers might go for a quality show made up of exceptional talent whether or not it had as yet gained any recognition. It meant a lot of searching, a lot of tryouts, and careful selection, but it worked. The customers never knew what they were going to get, but they knew it would be good and entertaining. That way we got a lot of people night after night who might have wearied of the same faces every night.

It wasn't long before the Silver Slipper became *the* place to go. Society flocked to it, and so did the underworld. Show people, and especially scouts for Hollywood and the legitimate stage, were regular customers. And there wasn't a columnist in town who didn't drop in at least once during the evening. It soon became Damon Runyon's favorite, and many of the picturesque characters he wrote about he saw in the Silver Slipper. His "Harry the Horse" was Pete the Goat, one of the partners in the joint. Many others he found in the audience. It was the Broadway spot for the Broadwayites.

And as a springboard to stardom, well, let me illustrate.

One Friday evening a tall, skinny lad came in and shyly asked if I would put him on as a tryout. He said his name was Ray Bolger. He said he had been working in cafés around Boston as a dancer, and that he had heard about me and the Silver Slipper, and he wanted a chance, "just a chance, mister, that's all."

"It's our celebrity night, kid," I said, "and I don't see how I can squeeze you in. Why don't you come around next week?"

"Well, if I live that long," he said, and I realized immediately that he probably needed the job pretty badly.

"Show me a few steps," I said, thinking that if he were any

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good I'd give him a couple bucks to tide him over until I could use him.

He did a few steps and I was struck by his exceptional talent. I had seen a lot of dancing in my few short years, but this was good.

"Kid," I said, "take a seat back there in the corner and I'll put you on later."

I did, and his amazing dancing and his fresh youth were a tremendous hit. And they have been ever since, through successful careers in the movies, television, and the legitimate theater.

I've been accused of having a deaf ear where music and good voices are concerned. I admit I prefer a good dancer, a pretty chorus, or a beautiful feminine figure to any other kind of entertainment, but once or twice in my life I have heard a voice that gave me a big thrill. Maybe I'm just particular. Anyway, when a boy by the name of Morton Downey came along one day and said he wanted a job in the Silver Slipper I signed him on after hearing only one song. His opening night was as thrilling a performance as any I have ever enjoyed, with the possible exception of some evenings with Al Jolson. The boy was wonderful, and a lot of other people must have thought so, too, for the Silver Slipper was his springboard to fame.

One of the best of the Broadway press agents of the day was a gal we all knew as Lela (Lela Emogene McMath Rogers). She had a daughter named Virginia, whom everyone called Ginger, and who was known around town as a pretty child dancer. She was just blossoming into womanhood when the Silver Slipper opened. She was probably not more than sixteen or seventeen at the time, but anyone with half an eye could see she was headed for the big time. I liked the kid so much the first time I saw her that I told her I would make



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her guest of honor on our Friday-night program. Only stars were featured in this manner, but I billed her as "A future star," and invited about a dozen top stars to the party. The big names in show business came and saw and were impressed as I had been.

Not long afterward Ginger got a spot in musical comedy and later scored a Broadway smash costarring with Ethel Merman and Willie Howard in *Girl Crazy*.

She went to Hollywood soon after that and I sort of lost track of her. I was in California myself a year or two later, on a recruiting trip for a new club I was opening on Broadway. Sam Marx, now TV production manager for Twentieth Century-Fox, took me to Palm Springs for a weekend. We were sunning ourselves on a bench near the tennis courts at the Desert Inn when Ginger, flushed and perspiring from a game, came over and sat beside me. We weren't talking long before I realized she was a very unhappy girl. A little encouragement and it soon came out.

"I'm just discouraged, Granny," she said. "I've been in Hollywood for months now, and I haven't even had a nibble. Dancers are a dime a dozen out here."

I tried to reassure her. "Stick around," I said. "They're bound to discover you sooner or later. You can't miss."

In the course of conversation I mentioned the big cabaret-restaurant I was planning to open in New York. She perked up immediately. "Put me on, Granny," she begged. "I'd be so much better off in New York. I want to go back. I want to forget Hollywood. And I'd work hard for you, Granny."

I told her I'd like nothing better than to have her in my show, she'd be an asset to any cabaret, but it was a step down from what she had last done on Broadway, and I didn't think she should even consider it. In fact, I wouldn't even make her a proposition. At least, not then.



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"Stick around," I said. "Wait it out another month, and if you haven't clicked by then, you can have any spot you want in my club."

The rest is well-known history. Ginger Rogers landed the lead in a picture with Fred Astaire. It was called *Flying Down to Rio*, and she flew to stardom in it. By the time my new club was beginning to catch on, theater managers across the nation were offering her \$5,000 a week for just coming out on the stage and bowing.

One night Ginger and her mother came into my club. They were beautifully gowned and Ginger's smile was radiant. "Hi, Granny," she said. "I just wanted to see the place where I might have worked."

But getting back to the Silver Slipper and its entertainment, a list of the hopefuls who later became stars would fill several pages. Ruby Keeler was an early feature of the Slipper shows and about three months after we opened we brought in Jimmy Durante and his partners Clayton and Jackson. This zany trio had started their comedy in their own little dive located up a dark stairway on Fifty-seventh Street. They called it the Club Durante. Durante had another club downtown, but both places were little more than hoodlum-backed dumps, catering to the same cheap trade. The Silver Slipper was the first top-flight club in which Durante had ever appeared. And with a beautiful line of twelve gorgeous girls around them, the trio was a wow. Durante's wild humor and the strutting and slam-banging of Eddie Jackson and Lou Clayton created chaos every night.

Jimmy never made fun of his nose in those days. Everyone knew he had a nose, naturally, but there were no gags about it. Watching him awhile, I got an idea. Why not have a whole chorus of Durantes? I had a mask maker make up several

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noses that looked like Jimmy's and we put them on Ruby Keeler and some of the other girls and the result was hilarious.

So, on the q.t., we started rehearsing a number, with the girls all dressed like Durante, bow ties, king-size noses and all, and Frank Bannister wrote a special song number for it. We wanted the whole act to be a surprise to Durante so whenever he came around we would switch to some other routine.

Opening night for this number, everyone on Broadway knew what we were up to. Everyone, that is, except Jimmy. We had kept it a well-kept secret. That night he finished his bit, shuffled offstage, and returned for his bow. As he did, all the girls lined up, and Jimmy saw a whole string of Durante schnozzolas. I'll never forget his shocked expression at that moment. Then he burst into the biggest laugh I'd ever heard him give. And in the finale he did the strutaway with the girls, hat in air, and eyes turned up, leaving the audience in an uproar.

From that moment on Jimmy Durante cashed in on his big nose. He turned what he had long considered a physical defect into his most profitable asset. He set the example for a lot of physically ill-favored people and proved to the world that it's not so much what you look like but what you've got inside that counts. Jimmy Durante had it inside, but plenty.

"Please, mister," said a small voice behind me one day, "can I try out for a job?"

I looked around and there stood the most unlikely-looking prospect for our show I had ever seen. She was a thin little girl with big dark eyes and the saddest expression I'd ever seen around a night club. She was too young. She was too thin. She had about as much sex appeal as a post. Her name was Imogene Coca, she said, and she opened her coat and



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showed me she was all ready to go on. She was wearing a tiny ballet costume.

I don't know whether it was her name, her wistfulness, or that incongruous costume that prompted me to give her a try. Probably I was just sorry for the kid. Anyway, I gave her a brief audition and immediately lost my heart to her. She managed to combine comedy with a pixie charm and her solo ballet became the funniest bit in our show.

I would walk out on stage as she dragged along behind, and I'd say, "I don't know why this funny little thing is in the show. She's got nothing, and she's too skinny."

Suddenly the audience would begin to howl. I'd look behind me quickly and say, "What did you do?"

She would look at me with a blank expression and say, "Nuthin'."

"You must have done something, they're laughing," I chided.

I'd resume walking and we'd repeat the routine, with the audience howling each time at her funny faces and pantomime behind my back. It may sound a little silly today, but it was so funny in those days that we went on with the act to other cafés and even theaters. The expert way she handles comedy on television today is the result of the experience she gained back in those dear dead days in the era of wonderful nonsense.

In one show at the Silver Slipper we had Imogene Coca, Ruby Keeler, Jimmy Durante, Walter O'Keefe, and George Raft. George had worked his pay up to \$75 a week at Guinan's club by this time, but it wasn't enough for him. And since they wouldn't pay him more at El Fay, he asked me to put him on at the Silver Slipper also.

I took him on and you never saw such a busy guy. He'd do his act at the Silver Slipper about midnight and at the



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Guinan spot about one-thirty, then he'd hop back over to the Silver Slipper. He kept this up, running between the two places all night.

Such a rat race hardly gave him time for Hannah Williams' motherly ministrations. Hannah, who later became the wife of Jack Dempsey, was about sixteen then, a darling of the Judy Garland type, with a singing and dancing spot in Guinan's show. Little Hannah, I think, had a crush on Raft.

Georgie would wind up his whirlwind dance with the difficult "over the top" maneuver, popular with dancers of that era, and finish in near exhaustion. He would stagger offstage covered with perspiration and out of breath. Hannah, as solicitous as a little mother, would stand in the doorway to his dressing room, a fresh clean towel in her hands, and as soon as Georgie came off she'd wrap the towel around his neck and wipe the sweat off his face.

"Poor Georgie," she'd croon as she fanned him. "You work too hard."

The topper to the Raft story at this period is the fact that he managed to take on a third show when I opened a production at the Playground. I don't recall what he was earning at this time but he was getting at least \$75 at each place, and earning it, believe me.

The Playground was managed by Tommy Guinan, Texas' brother, and backed by "the boys," as all the other spots were. The principals I engaged for this place were, besides Raft, Morton Downey (at \$150 a week) and Helen Morgan, the tragic torch singer (at \$300).

And the music for this show, though supplied by people not so well known then, would have a nice familiar ring to it today. The orchestra included Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, Joe Venuti on the violin, and Jack Teagarden and a magical trombone.

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John Steinberg was manager of that place. Today, as I have mentioned, he is general manager of the fashionable Hillcrest Country Club in the swank suburbs of Los Angeles.

With all the ambition and struggle for recognition that were evident in most of the youngsters of that era, a few took the easy road out and landed in the gutter. Some of the latter had had everything they needed in looks and talent, too, but not that certain something inside that made them keep their eyes on the ball. One of these was Hilda Ferguson.

I first met Hilda when someone brought her to one of the Sunday-afternoon soirées at my apartment. To say that I thought she was beautiful would be a simple understatement. I ranked her with Jean Harlow and Lucille Ball as one of the three most femininely beautiful girls I ever met. She was a miniature Lillian Russell. She had a sexy, throaty voice, completely at variance with her doll-like blonde beauty.

Hilda was seventeen then, and the mother of a year-old daughter. She had been married to a young Honduran medical student named Raymond Ugarte, but the marriage broke up and she was divorced.

I saw a good deal of Hilda after that Sunday afternoon in my place and from time to time she dropped in at my office. I gave her a dollar or two occasionally to tide her over rough spots, and once she phoned and said, "Granny! I've got to have big money!" But when she came in all she wanted was \$15. Her baby was sick in Baltimore, she said, and she had to have the money for train fare. She made \$15 sound like \$15,000.

Hilda wasn't seen around town for quite a while after that. Then one day she walked into my office again. She pulled out a small notebook and thumbed to a page.

"Granny," she said, "I figure I owe you \$223." Then she took out a roll of bills and counted out the exact amount and



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laid it on my desk. I was flabbergasted, and I remember thinking that if every girl I had given money to would come in and do what little Hilda had done, I'd be in the chips, but good! But Hilda Ferguson was one of the few who remembered.

"Hilda," I said, "you must need this dough. You're not working. Keep it."

She chuckled. "I got plenty more, Granny. Come with me, I want you to see me open a bank account." I did, and she plunked down a wad of fifties and hundreds that would have choked a cow.

I was more than curious about where she had got all that money, especially after telling me only a few weeks before that fifteen bucks was "big money." But I didn't ask her. I figured I'd find out sooner or later.

Hilda had been in a number of shows in the Broadway belt, had even paraded around in Ziegfeld's *Follies* in a big Indian headdress (and practically nothing more), and Irving Berlin gave her a nice spot in his *Music Box*. But the kind of money Hilda was throwing around now didn't grow on proscenium arches. She gave a party one night that cost \$2,000. I hung around until the last guest had left, and amid the shambles and the debris of the wing-ding I asked, "What are you doing it for, Hilda?"

She answered, "Granny, I just love a good time, that's all."

"But if you go broke none of these fair-weather friends will lift a finger to help you, don't you know that?"

She merely shrugged her beautiful shoulders, as if to say that tomorrow meant nothing to her, she was rolling in it and she didn't care how she spent it.

Then I got a call from Enoch "Nucky" Johnson, the political boss of Atlantic City. "I want you to build a show for me, Granny," he said. "Want to build it specially for a doll I know."



## *High Dives and Low*

Yes, it was Hilda. She was his reigning favorite at the time and he brought me in to build an elaborate show around her. He bought Atlantic City's Silver Slipper to provide the stage and he gave me a blank check to make of it the same kind of place that the Silver Slipper on Broadway turned out to be. He gave Hilda \$1,500 a week, a \$12,000 mink coat, a Rolls-Royce, and a palace for an apartment.

The idyl ended after a while and Nucky transferred his attentions and his gifts to Kitty Ray, ex-wife of Macoco, the millionaire playboy of the Pampas. It came fast and it went fast, and one night Hilda came to see me at the Silver Slipper in New York.

"Got a job for me, Granny?" she asked. "I always come back to you when I'm strapped, don't I?"

"I can't pay your kind of salary," I told her. "I can put you in a few numbers and offer you \$200 a week."

"I'll take it," she said, and there was genuine gratitude in her voice.

But this wasn't the end of Hilda Ferguson. It was merely the steppingstone to more fabulous events. Her life was as much like the history of that crazy period as anyone I could think of. She went the fast route with liquor and men. Millionaires old and young were among her admirers, big names among the underworld, business, and politics. She was engaged for a while to Aaron Benesch, multimillionaire Baltimore furniture king. The newspaper columns chattered of romance with the socially prominent Howard Lee.

With the help of one of these, or several of them, perhaps, she started her own speak-easy, a cozy little spot in an old brownstone. She traveled to Europe, noisily incognito, with twenty trunks and her Rolls. Once, when she visited El Fay, she saw Nucky Johnson sitting there with Kitty Ray. In a gesture designed to make her rival jealous, she casually

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bought a bracelet off Texas' arm. Texas said the price was \$25,000. Hilda peeled off twenty-five thousand-dollar bills and handed them over—with appropriate gestures.

Once she was called in for questioning when Dorothy King was found dead in her apartment. When tough Willie McCabe, bodyguard for Arnold Rothstein, was stabbed in a night club, she was asked what she knew.

"Why, darling," she murmured sweetly to Judge Freschi, "I was in the ladies' room."

They set her bail in that case at \$5,000 and Feets Edson put it up for her. He was a night-club owner and he said he put it up "because she used to work for me."

She forfeited the bail by failing to appear, but gangland admired her because she wouldn't talk. "Hilda is O.K.," they said. "She clams up when the cops get nosy."

Just two months and two days after the repeal of Prohibition Hilda died of peritonitis. She was twenty-nine.

There's a little more to the story which I should tell, since I am one of the few who know it.

A dozen years after Hilda's death I was in Atlantic City, watching the Miss America beauty contest. I was with a group of Broadway producers and on the lookout for theater and night-club talent.

Miss Baltimore that year was a tall, lissome girl with unusually black hair. We were all quite taken with her. She reminded me of someone, and I was annoyed because I couldn't remember whom. I sent my card back to her dressing room and asked for an interview.

In a moment she ran out and threw her arms around me. "Granny," she said, "my mother used to tell me about you. For years I've felt you were a part of my family."

I still didn't get it, and she saw the bewilderment in my

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face. "My mother was Hilda Ferguson," she said. "Remember?"

No wonder she had seemed so familiar. She was just the opposite in coloring, but she had Hilda's enchanting figure and the same features. Even her voice was the same. Her name, she said, was Yolande Ugarte. I hired her on the spot and she went to work in a place I had at that time called the Midnight Sun. I renamed her Hilda Ferguson, Jr.

Many of the columnists, remembering her mother, picked it up and before long Hilda, Jr., was as popular among the playboys as Hilda, Sr., ever was. Out of all her Broadway admirers she picked Frank Parker, the radio tenor. But the marriage was stormy and ended in divorce after two years. The Canadian millionaire, Duncan McMartin, was next, and, so far as I know, the only one in her life. You may remember some of the publicity the first Mrs. McMartin gave the case when she implied in her divorce proceedings that Yolande was the cause of the rift.



# 12

## *The Wrong Turning*

I have probably handed out more advice to more people in show business, and more people who wanted to get into show business, than any other man alive or dead. I never assumed the role of oracle—it was thrust upon me. People just figured that since I was so deep in the forest I must surely know something about the trees, so they asked me. And if I were to tally up my answers and give you a general breakdown you'd find that my advice was always the same, though it fell into two classifications. To those in show business, it was "Watch your step." To those who wanted to get into show business, it was "Watch your step." Although I never used those three words at any time, I went into the detail necessary to fit the occasion, and, summed up, it amounted to the same thing.

There may be professions that are more difficult to succeed in than show business, but I have never heard about them. I'm sure this is true where girls are concerned. There are places front and center for about a hundred stars. There must be about a million ambitious kids trying for those places. And it isn't the competition of numbers that makes it difficult, either.

Girls in show business are subjected to more temptation in a day than most other women encounter in a lifetime. It

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takes great mental and moral stamina for a girl to come through, not necessarily to stardom, but merely to retain her decency. No amount of care or guarding prepares her for this bewildering business. She picks her own way, and what she picks depends on her stamina. The dazzle easily blinds.

I have been told about a few who had what it takes, and some who were blinded. There was another whose name appeared often in the press of that day but whose real life story has never been told.

Into rehearsal at the Silver Slipper one afternoon came a particularly beautiful brunette. She was accompanied by her mother. She was only fifteen, but she was stunning and already a superb dancer. She looked much like Debra Paget of today's motion pictures, with all of Debra's fascinating characteristics. She was hired on the spot.

Ordinarily, I never permitted a mother to remain in the house while her daughter performed. It always seemed to me it was an implied insult to me as her employer and to the girl and her ability to take care of herself. But this little Marion Strasmick, for that was her name, lived some distance from the Slipper. She worked until 4 A.M., and because she was so young, I let her mother hang around and take her home.

Obviously, the mother was strict and the girl had always received her protection and affection. Of all the girls I knew, here was one I felt would always remain a clean, fine kid.

There was no air-conditioning in those days, so the Slipper closed during the summer. When it closed this year, I found a place for Marion and some of the others in Ziegfeld's *Follies*. Her professional name was changed to Marion Roberts.

A few weeks later I got a call from Flo. "Granny," he said, and there was a note of concern in his voice, "I wish you'd talk to that Roberts kid."



### *Blondes, Brunettes, and Bullets*

"Yeah? What about, Flo?" I asked. "What's wrong?"

"She's running around with Legs Diamond. I don't want any girl in my show mixed up with a mobster. See if you can get her to give him up."

Flo Ziegfeld and I were pretty close friends and I had a lot of respect for him. I would have done a lot for Flo, and I did. I scouted for him, I auditioned girls for him, I provided dozens of his lovelies, and I helped produce his shows, and I never asked nor received a cent for it. But going out of my way to advise this kid to drop the underworld's toughest gangster, well, this was strictly not in my line. I'd had recent unpleasant experiences in similar good-intentioned efforts.

"Look, Flo," I hedged, "I'll never tell any girl again to stop seeing her boy friend. I tried it once, and the girl told the guy. He was not so tough as Diamond, but he threatened to kill me. If this kid is stupid enough to run around with him, drop her."

But people don't always take my advice. Flo didn't. Marion was not only beautiful but she was talented, and a distinct asset to the *Follies*. Ziegfeld kept her on.

Legs Diamond was notoriously vicious. As a youth he was the leader of a mob of silk and fur hijackers and narcotics peddlers. On the side they pulled a few bank and mail-truck robberies. His was the first organized post-World War I gang. Lucky Luciano, of later fame, was one of his hands. With Prohibition, he branched out into rumrunning and dabbled in industrial-labor rackets.

But Legs Diamond was not a "businessman gangster." His character leaned more toward violence, and his trigger finger was itchy. He finally got to be a nuisance even to the underworld. He killed Dutch Schultz's partner, Joey Noey. He murdered Eugene Moran, the notorious robber who had various gang connections. He even tried to exterminate the



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feared Lepke, czar of labor-industrial racketeering. Bill Brennan, the old prize fighter whose bout with Jack Dempsey was one of the bloodiest ever fought for the heavyweight crown, was slain by one of Diamond's gunmen, because Brennan refused to pay \$2,500 for a load of Diamond's hijacked whisky. He was accused of kidnaping an upstate cider runner and putting torches to the soles of his bare feet.

"Diamond's always trying to muscle in on everything," one gangster told Police Commissioner Edward Mulrooney. "He's a good trigger, but he's too loud. He's gotta get out of town."

Since he seemed to have a charmed immunity from the law, the underworld decided to take matters into their own hands. Legs was shot four different times, battered by more than fifteen slugs. Once six bullets blasted him in one fusillade. Two struck him just below the heart. Miraculously, he remained alive. He was constantly a target of reprisal. The mob was out to get him.

When things got too hot for him in New York, he retired to his fortress estate at Acre, near Albany. There, in a rambling house enclosed in a high barbed-wire fence and guarded by vicious dogs and a battalion of bodyguards, he mapped and planned his numerous crimes. His ambition was to gain control of every racket, every gangland business, and every gangster.

He muscled into more activities than the law or anyone else ever figured out. And if it was necessary for him to snuff out a life here and there to gain his ends, it didn't seem to matter to him. Thus it became increasingly dangerous for him to leave Acre.

One Sunday a fusillade of shots rang out in a quiet hotel on Sixty-first Street. When the police arrived they found Legs Diamond lying in his own blood, with four bullets in

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him. And they found lovely Marion Roberts, clad in pajamas, weeping over his prostrate body.

The headlines said "Ziegfeld Girl Weeps Over Bullet Shattered Legs Diamond." The tabloids labeled her "Kiki," Kiki Roberts.

Marion came to me after this for help. She swore she was through with Diamond, that even if he recovered she would never go back to him.

"Look," I said. "You've broken your mother's heart. You gave Ziegfeld some bad publicity. I couldn't help you even if I wanted to. Anyone you touch is in danger from Legs' gunmen. Anyway, you'll go back."

"I'll never go back," she vowed. "I've learned my lesson. It's been a horrible nightmare. I'm done with Legs."

A week later Diamond had recovered sufficiently to be moved to his Acre fortress and Marion was with him.

But Marion Roberts was not the only girl in Legs Diamond's life, as she and dozens of others were to learn. He took his next one from one of my shows, and if anything she was more virtuous and innocent than Marion. Gracie Carroll's mother and grandmother both worked as wardrobe women. They were religious Irish people, as fine a family as I ever met. Gracie had worked for me for more than a year before she took up with Legs. And when her mother came to me in tears, to tell me Gracie was running around with Legs Diamond, I could hardly believe it.

There wasn't much I could do. I knew better than to talk to any girl about her hoodlum boy friend. The only thing I did was to talk to the girls en masse, on opening a new show or hiring new girls.

"When you're working for me," I'd say, "you are not required to meet anyone or play up to the customers. You will not be allowed to sit at a table in this club unless you get my



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permission, and I give my permission only when you sit with a relative. Break that rule and you are automatically fired. You are especially forbidden to have anything to do with hoodlums. If you do, I can tell you now, you can't win."

Gracie knew the rules so there wasn't anything more I could tell her.

Then one predawn two men were killed in the Hotsy Totsy Club, a tiny second-floor speak-easy facing on Broadway, at the corner of Fifty-fourth Street. The Hotsy Totsy was a trap, where playboys and prostitutes and riffraff cavorted and nice people went only to see the sights.

All the police knew about the case was that the torpedo had gone into this joint accompanied by a female companion. The unfortunate victims were Harry Cassidy, owner of the dive, and Simon Walker, an ex-convict. The girl fled through the main entrance and the killer went out via a back window. He edged himself along a ledge to an open window and crawled through it, into the ladies' room of the Fifty-Fourth Street Club, where I had another show. He slipped in, gun in hand, just as a well-known comedienne, currently appearing in a Broadway show, came into the room. His unorthodox arrival was embarrassing to the lady, to say the least, and her remarks anent the occurrence made barroom laughs for weeks.

Barney Ruditsky, the ace Broadway detective (now a Hollywood investigator), said the murder smelled like Legs Diamond. He had been tipped off that Diamond and Gracie were staying at the President Hotel. He took one look at the Hotsy Totsy and its gruesome corpses and directed his men to run to the hotel.

But Gracie and her trigger-happy companion had fled a moment before the police arrived.

Gracie was never seen again.



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Months later, after Diamond was finally killed, the underworld legend, still believed to this day, began to be talked about. Gracie had witnessed a murder, two murders, and the killer was not one to leave any loose witnesses lying around. The story is that he put her feet in a tub of concrete and dropped her into the Hudson River. One hopes, mercifully, that he killed her first.

Eventually the big city became too hot for Diamond. He moved out of New York and again holed up at his Acre fortress. But the mob was hot now and they weren't letting up. He opened an inn in the Catskill Mountains and gunmen caught him there and left enough sawed-off shotgun slugs in him to kill half-a-dozen men. But again he recovered.

He was tried in Albany for kidnaping a beer runner and was acquitted. He celebrated with a big party in an Albany hotel room, with Mrs. Diamond and all his henchmen. Around midnight he slipped from the room and went to a modest rooming house where he met Marion Roberts. He was very drunk, and Marion (according to her testimony later) left him sleeping on the bed.

Two men came into the room and one of them grabbed Legs Diamond by the ears. He held him that way while the other poured shot after shot into the middle of his face.

When the law arrived, Marion was draped over her lover. But neither tears nor medical science could help Legs Diamond this time.

Newspapers from coast to coast had a field day with the story of the beautiful Ziegfeld girl who stuck by her gangster paramour. For a while she cashed in on the publicity. She got \$2,000 a week for a fan dance at the Academy of Music. For eight or ten weeks she picked up about the same in various theaters. But the sensation and the success died gradually and she slid into burlesque and finally to a roadhouse in New

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Jersey. Later, she found work in a saloon in the Bronx, a notorious hangout where the police could always find suspects.

She phoned me one day, and I met her in this dive. Time and alcohol had destroyed much of the loveliness of the girl who had looked so much like Debra Paget only a few years before. She sadly told me the whole story, how she had met Diamond, how she became his mistress, how she was drawn into his activities. She told of his comings and goings and how he plotted murder and robbery. She knew so much, she said, that she was afraid to make a move that might displease him. He would have killed her as easily as he wiped out all the others.

Marion Roberts was endowed with all the physical qualifications for stardom, but she lacked that certain something inside, that moral stamina which those who fulfill themselves must draw on many times as they climb through the maze of brambles on their way to the top.

# 13

## *They Lived It and Loved It*

It has been said about many wise men that they got along on very little sleep. I never by any stretch of the imagination could consider myself a very wise man, but I got along on very little sleep. I didn't sleep because I simply didn't have time to. Unfortunately, it became a habit, this doing without sleep, and I suffer from it to this day.

But a little thing like sleep doesn't matter much when you are young and ambitious and enjoying what you are doing. At least, that is the way I felt, and I think Damon Runyon felt the same way.

Damon never wanted to go home. He loved to sit up late. He'd just sit and talk and drink endless cups of coffee. I realize now that Damon was working. Those all-night shifts of his were really just his collection periods. He soaked up material, characters, plots, sequences, like a blotter takes up ink.

What with running shows in half-a-dozen night spots, managing WHN programs and Loew publicity, I must have represented one good source of material. We were together a great deal, and I could tell you the stories behind some of the stories that Runyon wrote.

There was the story of Arnold Rothstein, for instance.



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Arnold Rothstein was his real name. Damon, writing fiction, gave him another.

Our hangout in those days was the old Lindy's. The new Lindy's, a popular, big, brash place on the corner of Fifty-first Street and Broadway, wasn't built yet. It probably wasn't even a dream in Leo Lindeman's mind at that time. Leo, one of the nicest guys who ever hit Broadway, parlayed a pastrami sandwich and the best cup of coffee into an institution. But you could hardly call the old Lindy's an institution. It was a narrow slot, across the street and farther south, next to the Rivoli Theatre.

Damon and I had a regular seat to the right of the entrance, where we could see, if we sat long enough, everyone on Broadway. One who used Lindy's as his headquarters was Arnold Rothstein. He was smooth, well dressed, and, to all appearances, a businessman. And businessman he actually was, for Arnold Rothstein was the "banker" of the underworld. He handled daily deals that involved hundreds of thousands. No one ever knew the real volume of business he handled, for he did all of it "under his hat."

It was a ticklish business, for moneylenders have never been the most popular members of society. Add to this the fact that Rothstein's customers were all underworld characters who used their loans for illegitimate operations, and you can see that risky is a better word than ticklish. The mobsters hated him, but because he had cash to loan when they needed it, they had to go to him.

I often wondered how he figured his interest rates. He had something to do with every speak-easy, he financed rum-runners and the hijackers who took it from them. He loaned the money that opened the Silver Slipper and he helped to finance the Cotton Club. And his profits on these deals would have made any legitimate banker green with envy.

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It was inevitable in the explosive world in which he lived that some gangster, sooner or later, would get him. The newspapers were full of Arnold Rothstein's demise. The gory details made tabloid copy for days. But the details, the behind-the-scenes facts, leading up to the bloody end, were never published.

The story begins with an I O U, several I O U's, in fact, and they weren't I O U's that gangsters had given Rothstein. They were I O U's that Rothstein himself gave.

Arnold Rothstein was playing cards for high stakes one night in the Park Central (now the Park Sheraton) Hotel. Sitting in the game were Nick the Greek, the fabulous gambler, and Frank McMannis, a big breezy Irishman, and others. As Rothstein won a pot, he pulled in the cash. But when he lost one, he wrote an I O U and tossed it in. Naturally, in a break-even game, as this was, such tactics eventually netted him a pile of dough. When the game broke up he walked out with nearly a quarter of a million dollars in cash and left I O U's for approximately the same amount.

The unwritten law among such big-time gamblers was that such I O U's must be settled within a week or so. But after a couple of weeks Rothstein still had not made good. In an attempt to realize something on their loss, the gamblers sold Rothstein's "paper" (or lost it in another game) for about \$100,000. The purchaser (or the new holder of the I O U's) approached Rothstein.

"I've got a quarter million of your paper," he said. "When are you going to pay off?" Rothstein brushed him off with a shrug.

A few days later Arnold Rothstein, Damon Runyon, and I were sitting together at Lindy's. There was a telephone on a landing about halfway up a flight of stairs at the old Lindy's.



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Arnold used it more than anyone else, so if it could be said that he had an office or headquarters, then Lindy's was it.

The phone rang and Arnold jumped up. "That's for me," he said.

In a moment he was back. "Got an important date," he said. "See you later," and he left.

Damon and I were working through the fourth cup of coffee an hour later when the "Times Square Telegraph," our Broadway version of the grapevine, brought word that Arnold Rothstein had been shot.

"My God!" Runyon gasped. "The guy just left here!"

That's how Damon Runyon scored one of his most famous scoops for the New York *American*. He was the last to see the underworld banker who welched on his I O U's before he walked to his death. McMannis, a fellow named Barney Berman, and half-a-dozen other hoodlums were eventually rounded up by the police, but to this day no one has ever been convicted of Rothstein's slaying.

Runyon's inside track on the night-club circuit gave him more than one scoop and the material for some of his most dramatic sequences. We never witnessed a gangland murder, but we knew the preliminaries that led up to one, and our guesses had a high batting average. Nearly every night-club owner that I worked for or knew ended his days in violence.

Frankie Marlowe, proprietor of the Silver Slipper, also ran the Club Rendezvous, next door to the Winter Garden. He was also a partner with Larry Fay in Les Ambassadeurs. And at one time he had shares in LaVie, along with Link Mitchell of the notorious Hudson Dusters, and Jim Redman. Frankie was a member of the infamous Unione Siciliano which was involved in crime leadership across the country.

I kept my distance from these fellows as much as possible.



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Nevertheless, it was inevitable that I would have my difficulties. The first serious run-in was with Frankie Marlowe.

In the course of rehearsal at the Silver Slipper one day I had to reprimand one of the girls for inattention and a laggard attitude toward her work. A few minutes later one of Frankie's boys tapped me on the shoulder.

"Granny, Frankie wants to see you," he said.

I went out to the lobby and Marlowe grabbed me by the shirt front. "If you talk to that girl like that again," he snarled, "I'll kill you."

Doubtless it was such heavy-handed tactics as this that were his undoing. Marlowe was found one morning in a clump of bushes near that cemetery across the East River from Manhattan.

Next on the list of Silver Slipper associates to reach the end of the road was Harry Block. Harry, like his comrades, had a legal pistol permit. But Harry went them one further. He got himself named a deputy sheriff of the Bronx. The sheriff under whom he received this commission was Edward J. Flynn, later to become New York Secretary of State under the administration of Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Block was a good-natured guy, and although Bill Duffy and Frankie Marlowe had more to say about the Slipper's management, I tried to confine my dealings to him. Block and I got along O.K. But he, too, got his comeuppance in typical gangster style. There was some talk that Owney Madden was to blame, but Owney had the best alibi of all. He was in Sing Sing.

Owney Madden had an active career during Prohibition. He was arrested fifty-seven times and convicted twice. One conviction was for a traffic violation. The other was for the murder of Patsy Doyle. Owney got ten to twenty for that one, though it is highly doubtful if he was the one who fired the

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shots. But he was involved in a dispute over the leadership of the Gophers, who vied with the Hudson Dusters. Also, there was something about Patsy and Owney's bride, the beautiful Loretta.

Freda Horner, who had been one of Patsy's molls, left him for Madden, then put the finger on Patsy. Freda was the one who supplied most of the testimony that put Owney away.

Owney got out on parole after a few years, and later he voluntarily went back to Sing Sing. He had a lot of friends. State Supreme Court Justice A. J. Levy, hearing the case, declared, "I think this man would make a useful member of society." And several New York columnists put in a good word for him. But it was lucky for Owney that he went back up the river, because it was while he was paying off his debt that Block was murdered.

Harry Block had opened a bright new cabaret within a few blocks of the Cotton Club in Harlem. That wasn't a friendly thing to do, for such powers as Arnold Rothstein and Owney Madden had money in the Cotton Club.

I met Madden, on a trip to Sing Sing with a visiting show, and he told me to tell Block to close up. It was only a friendly message, he said. "For the benefit of all concerned," he said.

I relayed the warning, but Block just laughed. A few days later he and his wife were in the elevator of their apartment when two gunmen stepped up. It was a sudden and violent end for Harry Block.

Owney Madden, as I said, was in Sing Sing, and, anyway, there were many others, more violent and more ruthless than Owney, whose toes had been tramped on by Harry Block.

With their early lead in the business, Larry Fay and Texas Guinan were undoubtedly the king and queen of the night-club operators. How long they might have reigned no one knows. They were both such extrovert personalities, they



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lived high on the hog while they had it, but sooner or later it was bound to prove too rich even for their blood. The beginning of the end for Fay became pretty obvious when his delusions of grandeur got the better of him. Coining money in the El Fay, he decided he could further his climb on the social ladder by opening a night club more garish and more lavish than anything else on Broadway. He even had delusions that he was a bigger showman than Ziegfeld.

"I'm gonna build the biggest cabaret in the world," he said. "Granny, I'm gonna beat Ziegfeld."

He revealed he had taken over a place on Fiftieth Street and planned to expand it so it would seat 1,000 people. "You do the shows, Granny," he said, "and I'll cut you in on it."

Well, I wasn't so close to this forest that I couldn't see some of the trees, as I said before, and one of the things I knew was that you couldn't operate an illegal business on such a big scale. You couldn't sell liquor on such a grand scale without Prohibition agents climbing all over the place. "It'll lay an egg, Larry," I warned him. "I don't want any part of it."

But he went ahead. He even made a trip to Paris and London to look over the night-club layouts there, in the search for ideas and the proper décor for his dream spot. He also did a little personal shopping in London and came back with twelve trunks filled with Bond Street clothes. He had to have a wardrobe commensurate with the new place.

He opened, with all the money he made in the El Fay and all he could borrow from his gangster friends. He sent out engraved invitations to every socialite in the book, and planned an opening the like of which Broadway had never seen.

He lasted just two months. He tried another, more modest place after that, but the golden touch was gone. The people



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stayed away in such numbers that he was forced to close this one without even paying the salaries of his chorus girls.

By this time he had split with Texas, so she, too, had her own night spot and her own delusions of grandeur. She decided that a spot in the Florida real-estate boom would be the right locale. At her suggestion, and on my own curiosity, I made a trip to Miami and scouted the whole area. Wild-eyed speculators were throwing money around like peanut shells at a circus. I couldn't see it. I kept my money, enjoyed the Florida sunshine for a spell, and came home. "Don't do it, Texas," I said. "It's nothing but a bubble."

So Texas took her entire show, lock, stock, and G-string to Florida. She said she would be gone all winter. "Like making money on a vacation," she said.

She was back in New York before Christmas, a dismal failure. She floundered around trying to get another start on Broadway and finally came to me. I helped line up a deal for her with Big Frenchy De Mange and Owney Madden. This was her biggest success. I left Texas when she started hiring her own girls—the wrong kind of girls—and after I left she went on the road with a show. She became ill while playing a cabaret in Chicago, but managed to continue her tour as far as Seattle. There, within ten months of the death of Larry Fay, she, too, passed on to the land where ex-night-club queens go.

Fay's demise wasn't quite so peaceful. He lost his temper once too often when he fired the doorman of a night spot he was trying to operate. The man turned on him and shot him dead.

So ended the lives of these two who, with the El Fay, really opened up the dizzy night-club life of the twenties. They lived it and loved it and left it before the era ended.

# 14

## *Just Like Stocks and Bonds*

By the time Prohibition was two years old it had spawned more than 5,000 speak-easies and night clubs in Manhattan alone and more than 1,000 of these were in the Broadway belt. Though they made their money from the sale of illegal liquor, this was not their only attraction. Many of them offered entertainment and the quality ranged from out-and-out bordellos to the top-hat Broadway spots that offered Ziegfeld-type revues, ace dance teams, and name bands.

With so many places offering entertainment, anyone who could toot a horn, shake a leg, wear a costume, or wear nothing could find employment. Add to this market the fact that this was the heyday of big shows such as Ziegfeld's *Follies* and Earl Carroll's *Vanities* and George White's *Scandals*, the burlesque houses and vaudeville circuits, and you can imagine what a prosperous era it was for show business.

Live show business, that is, for the silent movie was having its troubles. Loew's theaters were all half-and-half houses, half their programs were pictures and half vaudeville. And there was no doubt about it, patrons liked the stage presentations. The only thing that saved the cinema (and eventually killed vaudeville) was the invention of sound movies. The talkies turned the tide of popularity, but throughout the 1920's Loew's theaters rode on top of the wave. And during

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the first half of the decade we were employing more people in vaudeville than any other organization.

Although my main job for Loew was publicity, I had a lot to do with the vaudeville programs. Add to this my use of talent on WHN and my personal interest in about a dozen night-club shows around town, and you get an idea that the tall, skinny guy from Lappland had become something of an impresario. And I had gained a reputation as a connoisseur of ability whether it was musical, vocal, terpsichoreal, or simply feminine beauty.

Looking back on this period of my life, I cannot remember when the transition from awkward lad to serious judge really occurred. I guess it was one of those great changes that take place when we are too busy to notice. You land in the big city filled with ambition and the sure knowledge that you can lick all-comers. You take a few jolts and you get a lot of the cocksureness knocked out of you and then you settle down to a busy schedule and before you know it you are a recognized specialist in something. That's the way it happened to me.

And you don't get a reputation as a connoisseur of anything by playing with it. I was a judge of pulchritude but I kept all my associations with the dolls on that high plane called friendship. It wasn't difficult for me to do, for the simple reason that I was much too homely for them to look upon me as anything but a big brother to them. The few cases when I might have fallen head over heels in love with someone I found that someone always looking past me to some no-account but handsomer guy than N. T. G. Even the name they called me, "Granny," has all the connotations of family relationship.

People on the outside of show business might wonder how I escaped emotional entanglements, but show people understand. Emotions and business don't mix any more in show



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business than they do in the hardware or grocery business. That's why so many people in the entertainment world marry nonprofessionals. And that may be why such marriages are more likely to be successful than marriages within the ranks of show business. But to fall in love and marry someone outside of show business, one would first have to meet her, and I met very few people who didn't have something to do with the entertainment field. Certainly I met very few women who were not in show business. It was inevitable, therefore, that when and if I ever should fall in love it would be with someone in that field.

Earl Carroll was a fairly successful song-writer friend of mine who had ambitions to be more than a tunesmith. One day he told me how he had been studying Ziegfeld's setup and how he thought he could break in on his monopoly. "Granny," he said, "I want to do a big musical like Flo's and call it the *Vanities*, Earl Carroll's *Vanities*."

"Got any money?" I asked. "That kind of show takes plenty of dough."

"I don't have any," he said, "but I know where I can get it. That's no problem. But how am I going to get the girls?"

I was pretty busy rounding up replacements for Ziegfeld, for the night clubs and our vaudeville circuits, but at that moment all these "markets" were pretty well stocked. "I'll get them for you," I said. "Leave it to me."

Carroll rented an old theater and I sent out chorus calls. The hardest job in this business is getting a group of girls who are uniform in size and figure. It takes time. Finally, we had a line of eighteen and a few who could do specialties. I called Earl and he hired the lot just as I had picked them. That was the first of Earl Carroll's *Vanities*.

On my insistence he paid the girls \$100 a week as a minimum wage. Ziegfeld was paying that and I felt that any girl

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who could qualify for his show should be paid that. It was a lot of money in those days (equivalent to about \$300 today), but it was the only way to get the right girls. I also knew something about staging so I helped Carroll line up some expert technicians, and the magnificent lighting effects he attained were the result of this backstage skill.

It wasn't long before his show was being mentioned as a rival for the Ziegfeld spot. This didn't please Flo and he was hurt, and told me so. I didn't want to lose his friendship, so I got out of the musical-revue end of the business right there. From then on I acted merely as a consultant, scout, and judge for Ziegfeld's *Follies*, Earl Carroll's *Vanities*, and George White's *Scandals*. I didn't do so much for George as I did for Flo and Earl, but when he set up his *Scandals*, I just sent over all the girls that weren't working in the other places and let him take it from there.

Everyone in the business in those days was called on to play a great many benefit performances. Some of these "benefits" were legitimate, but many were just plain impositions. It got so that every hoodlum who wanted to give a banquet for a political figure, or even for his own cronies, called it a "benefit" and expected the cabarets and musical shows to provide the entertainment.

Earl Carroll had worked out a system to handle these extra-curricular jobs. He selected four or five dancers who did specialties and had an overtime arrangement with them. When he got a demand for talent to play a "benefit," he sent these girls, under the escort of a youngster named Herman Hover. Herman was a nice kid and always considerate of the girls. I liked Herman and although we didn't need a stage manager at the Silver Slipper, I hired him and gave him that title and \$25 a week. I'm sure he appreciated it because what he was earning in Carroll's show wasn't much.



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But there was another reason for my liking Herman Hover. At one of those benefit parties one evening he introduced me to one of his girls, a lovely seventeen-year-old dancer named Rose Wenzel. She came toward me from across the room and about all I could see at first was a gorgeous blonde head and eyes that fairly swept me off my feet. As she came closer and Herman introduced her, I saw how young and innocently sweet she was. It was hard for me to believe, as Herman was telling me, that she had been a professional dancer since she was fourteen.

A lot of water has been dammed since those days and many thirsts have been quenched, but I shall always be grateful to Herman Hover for that introduction. For the hardened talent scout and experienced judge of feminine pulchritude fell madly in love just like any other ordinary man. A year later Rose Wenzel and N. T. G. became Mr. and Mrs. Granlund.

Joe Vogel, by then a rising young executive of the Loew organization, was best man. Joe and I had become close friends in the days since our experience together at the Seventh Avenue Theatre when we first called attention to Charlie Chaplin.

Rose had got her start in show business in St. Louis as a protégée of the famous Skouras brothers. When they opened their magnificent theater in St. Louis, she was the first actress they employed. They visited us at our home frequently after we were married, and through the years they remained close friends. When either one of them came to town, they always looked up their "little Rosie." Our visits with them were always the occasion for many reminiscences of the "old days" when the brothers first came to America, of their struggles. They were still comparatively unknown even in those days, but they had big plans. Eventually, Spyros, George, and Char-



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lie were to own more theaters than anyone else in the world and become leaders in the motion-picture industry as well.

And Herman Hover? Well, Herman studied law while working in show business and eventually he passed the bar examinations. But he also developed a good head for show management and in time became the right arm of Earl Carroll. When Carroll moved to Hollywood and built his huge theater-restaurant there, Herman helped him finance it and became its general manager. Later he branched out on his own. Today he is the well-known owner of the world-famous Ciro's, in the heart of the cinema and television capital.

Rose continued in show business as an entertainer for a couple of years. She appeared in an intimate revue with Lillian Roth, and she danced in Carroll's *Vanities*. But she also had a head for business and in time we found it more profitable for her to devote all her energies to helping me. She soon knew as much about organizing shows and handling girls as I did and when, later, I was asked to put on a show in London, Rose helped in the production. She and her sister Eileen, another beautiful doll, represented me in the production of shows I sent to Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro.

So never let it be said that a man can become inured to beauty. A guy can be surfeited with it, pay no more attention to it than he would to stocks and bonds, but let the right one come along and he'll fall just as hard as any other member of the species *Homo sapiens*.

# 15

## *A Straight Man and His Comedian*

The peculiar directional broadcasting success that WHN enjoyed in northern New Jersey was the original cause of my stage debut.

I had performed as master of ceremonies at theater openings and celebrity nights, and speaking to audiences had become a part of my routine work for Loew's, but none of this could be called acting. However, when WHN began to get a small flood of fan mail from Jersey, Nick Schenck began to get ideas. When Billy Downs, the manager of Loew's State in Newark, called Nick and told him I was so popular in the neighborhood he ought to send me over to play a week on their stage, Nick readily agreed.

"But I don't want to play a full week," I said. "All the people in that neighborhood who would want to see me wouldn't fill one house, let alone several times a day for a week." So we compromised on a three-day run.

I felt a little better about the engagement a day or two later, after I had filled an emergency speaking date in New Jersey. The Women's Clubs of New Jersey, meeting in convention, discovered at the last moment that their principal speaker had failed to show up. I got a rush call to go over and save the program.

I talked about show business for an hour and when I got

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through I was pretty sure I'd made some friends. I felt certain that the ladies would show their gratitude by coming to the Newark theater if I played there.

Actually, I wasn't caught totally unprepared for this sudden addition to my regular work. I didn't welcome it, but if I had to do it, I knew how. I always considered my night-club shows as a sort of bush-league training ground. They were the "farms" that supplied talent for the big leagues: Ziegfeld's, Earl Carroll's *Vanities*, George White's *Scandals*, Loew's vaudeville circuits, and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. By choosing a girl here and a specialty act there, combing my club shows for talent, I could put together a pretty good thirty-minute show. I could get into it myself by simply going one step further than a mere master of ceremonies and taking a more active part in the acts.

So I put together a pretty nice show, and with a little plugging on WHN I figured we ought to get a few customers for the first day or two. I didn't know exactly how many listeners we had in this area, but just to play safe I decided it might be a good idea to do something different for the third night.

We had a comic on WHN, a fellow I called an unconscious comedian, who was a pretty droll number. He had walked in one day and announced that he was the mayor of West New York. I had put him on because I didn't have anything else to fill a spot and he turned out to be one of the funniest guys we ever had. He came over frequently after that, and though we never paid him a cent, he put on some excellent programs. And once, on his invitation, Harry Richman and I visited "his honor" in West New York and got taken on a tour of his business associates. Most of them were in the illegal liquor business, wholesalers, runners, cutters (who changed 100 proof into about 20 proof), and similar activities. We had a



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wonderful time and Harry made a speech on the steps of the city hall.

So for one show, and to allay my fear of an empty house, we arranged a "West New York Night." Our old friend, the comic mayor, was invited and told to bring his friends. And we gave it a little boost over WHN.

Well, I needn't have worried. As a matter of fact, by the end of the second day our own show had so packed the Newark theater that I was beginning to worry over having enough seats for the West New York Night. And when that night arrived, I knew my worst fears were realized.

The mayor arrived in a hundred-car motorcade and the house was sold out. I had no place to put them. I brought the mayor, the chief of police, the fire chief, and most of the officials backstage. The others found standing room all around the sides, the aisles, and the back. And since I had all these officials on stage, I decided to use them. The mayor was just as funny as he had been on the radio, and the hit of his act was his complaint that no place had been provided for him and his delegation to park their cars and as a result every one of them had got parking tickets from the Newark police.

The fire chief had come toggged out in a Scottish getup, kilt, tartan, and the works, and he sang a song in dialect. It was something to the effect "that if a firre brrreaks out in West New Yorrrk, keep it burrrning till I get therre!"

With such nonsense and ballyhoo we got by for three days. The manager was so pleased that he begged us to stay out the week. But I didn't want to press my luck, or have to dream up any new gimmicks, so I refused. Nevertheless, the Newark debut gave the Loew executives further ideas.

One of the hoodoo houses in the Loew chain was a cavernous former opera house called the Academy of Music, on a side street near Borough Hall in Brooklyn. It's still there, I

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understand, and I hope the present management isn't having as much trouble filling it as we did. At the time I made my debut in Newark we were running special so-called concerts at the Academy on Sunday nights in an attempt to steam up business, but red ink was flooding the place. So after our Jersey success, Nick told me to take my show to the Academy. We billed it as a one-night stand, to replace the Sunday-evening "concert." As we set out for Brooklyn that Sunday I was wondering if we were headed for a one-night stand or a one-night flop. But for some unfathomable mystery the house was nearly full that Sunday night. The manager, all smiles, was waiting in the wings when I came offstage.

"Granny," he said, "Nick Schenck just called up and I told him what wonderful business we had tonight and he wants you to go out and announce that you're coming back next week."

I made the announcement, but with considerable reluctance. Now that the customers had seen our show once, what could I give them a second time around? I phoned Harry Richman as soon as I got back to my office. Harry was still doing his stint on radio, without pay, and working in Benny Leonard's Ringside Café for \$100 a week. "You gotta help me, Harry," I said. And I told him I'd pay him twenty-five bucks for the evening and he readily agreed. That was a lot of dough for a single performance for Richman at that time.

But the show that second Sunday night was a bigger success than the first one, and again Nick Schenck phoned. "Tell Granny to announce he'll be back again next Sunday," he said.

Ye gods! I thought, has Nick gone crazy? We had been lucky for two in a row. The third one was sure to lay an egg. I booked Harry again and told him to spend the following week thinking up a new routine. I did the same with the



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girls. Ruby Keeler was one of the group at that time and Ruby was so versatile that I knew I didn't have to worry about her. So, believe it or not, our luck held for the third Sunday in a row. We were a smash hit.

After that Nick Schenck decided to bring the act into the Metropolitan Theatre, one of the larger more beautiful houses in Brooklyn, for a full week's run.

That summer was a rough one on show business and show people. It was one of the hottest summers I ever remember, and no one had yet heard of air-conditioning. Anyone looking for entertainment went to the beaches, and a whole lot of the wonderful kids I had come to know were having a hard time finding work. It was just when the weather was hottest and things were the toughest that the date for the Metropolitan came along. I didn't want to do it, but Nick gave me \$1,000 to buy a show with and I figured I could make a bunch of kids happy even if I didn't pack the Metropolitan.

I hired twenty of them at \$50 each and one of them, I remember, was Barbara Stanwyck. She had a cabaret dancing job at the time, but she was about as hard up as the rest.

We didn't sell any standing room at the Metropolitan but we did all right. Considering the time and the temperature I'd say we did better than that. And by the time I had finished out that week I considered myself a full-fledged actor. I didn't do much, just kicked it around with the kids on stage, mostly ad-libbed, a joke here and a wisecrack there, but it went over big.

So big, in fact, that the next thing I knew Nick had booked us into Loew's State on Broadway, which in our circuit was like Carnegie Hall on the symphony run.

I still had Harry in the act when we landed on Broadway and you should have seen the guy work, and how he worked. He not only wowed 'em at Loew's State, but after each night



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show he would go out front on Broadway and make a speech to the crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he'd yell, "did you like our show?" He'd pause for cheers, then continue. "Well, we are all now going over to Benny Leonard's Ringside Café. Yes, sir, ladies and gentlemen, I will positively appear there in person in a few moments."

You can imagine what would happen after that. The Ringside would be packed to the rafters for the rest of the evening.

But Harry was nobody's fool. With this kind of ballyhoo for the café he felt he was easily worth twenty-five bucks a week more than he was getting. Benny didn't think so. "A hundred and twenty-five bucks a week?" he screamed. "Harry, you want to bankrupt me?"

"So what'll I do?" asked Harry, when he told me about it later.

"Cool your hot feet," I said, "and let me think." I picked up the telephone and called the proprietor of a swank speak-easy on Fortieth Street. I knew the guy was looking for a specialty but didn't want a whole show. I told him about Harry, what he was doing for Leonard's Ringside, and gave him a big plug. "Furthermore," I said, "I think I can get Harry to switch over to your place for only two hundred bucks a week." The guy didn't come up for the bait quite as fast as I thought he would so when I saw he was hesitating I said, "And I'll get you a pretty named Lina Basquette for nothing."

"Who's da dame?" he asked.

"Lina's a protégée of mine," I said. "She's the finest ballerina I've ever seen. Really high class. She and Richman would give your place the kind of style you're looking for."

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I figured the engagement would be a good place to show her off, for Lina was then only sixteen and she hadn't had enough experience to command much money. I was sure I could convince Flo Ziegfeld once he saw her perform professionally.

"I'll take 'em," said the speak proprietor. I turned to Harry. "You're in," I said.

Two days later Ziegfeld took one look at Lina Basquette and hired her as premiere ballerina of the *Follies* at \$400 a week. The best I'd expected to get out of him was a minor principal's spot at maybe half that salary.

Richman, as I anticipated, took most of the Ringside business with him. Benny Leonard sought him out after a few days and begged him to come back at \$250 and a third interest in the business. Harry took the deal and went back to the Ringside. But he had something else in his mind now and a few months later it came out. He had made a lot of friends along Broadway and some of these friends had money. Harry opened his own place, the Harry Richman Club, on Fifty-sixth Street, with a five-dollar cover charge and dinner clothes the entrance requisite. He even refined his taste in songs. Instead of his old familiar "Does the Spearmint Lose Its Flavor on the Bedpost Over Night?" he now favored the more sophisticated "Putting on the Ritz."

It wasn't long then before Harry had all the money he needed. He even had enough to buy a yacht. And I had hardly recovered from the scare he had given me only a few months before when he had taken me out in a little put-put off Coney Island. He wanted to see the girls in bathing suits along the beach and he ran the leaky little scow in so close he rammed it onto a rock and sank it. Fortunately, we were close enough to shore to wade out.

Harry Richman and I were known as the Damon and



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Pythias of Broadway. We went up in the show world together. Harry went into George White's *Scandals* and later I negotiated a deal with Ziegfeld which brought him into the *Follies*. He became a very wealthy man, with a huge home at Miami Beach, a gorgeous yacht, a magnificent ranch near Elko, Nevada, his own airplane, and the friendship of the greats of the show world. It all started with his work with me on WHN in 1922.

For the next few years my vaudeville act became a regular part of my job. To say that my tempo had been speeded up would be putting it mildly. But to make it worse, I still had frequent split-week engagements. Working in a full-week show gave me an opportunity to schedule my time so that I could hop from night club to radio to night club to my publicity desk to vaudeville without the loss of much but sleep. The split week, though, was rough.

By this time, however, I had worked out a pretty smooth routine. A comedian would open, and after he gave out with the silly patter for a couple of minutes, he would introduce me. We'd kick it around then, with me taking the straight role. It required a comic that was brash and quick with the ad lib.

Something happened to my comic, though, on the return engagement I got at the Metropolitan in Brooklyn, some months after my initiation experience there. I had to scout around and find a replacement at the last moment, and fill-in comics are always hard to find. Usually you've got to take inexperienced youngsters or broken-down has-beens. Unless you're lucky. I was lucky. I knew of a bright kid by the name of Milton Berle and I asked for him.

There was no time to rehearse anything and I never did much rehearsing anyway. I never read a line in my life, but



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I planned to go over some ideas with Miltie just before we went on. When I arrived at the theater, however, I discovered that the house was already full and the manager had pushed up the schedule to allow for four shows instead of the three we had planned to give.

Berle was already on stage when I arrived. I rushed on and we began, without a line, without rehearsal. He had seen me work in Loew's State and he was familiar with most of my stock lines, but following through was no easy task. Nevertheless, I have never seen anyone who could ad lib as fast as he. Miltie was marvelous, and the audience ate it up. Sometimes the customers would simply rock with laughter, like wheat in a gale. Our three-day run was expanded to a week and Milton Berle worked the first full week of his busy career.

At the first show a prim middle-aged lady sat in one of the front-row seats. Every word that Berle spoke caused her to let out with gales of laughter. It was contagious, and it sparked the roars that came from the audience. I wondered about her, for I couldn't help but notice her from my place on stage.

After the show she bounced backstage and Milton introduced us. "Meet my mom," he said.

It's an old and many-times-told story now how this mother's devotion paid off. No one ever had a more devoted mother, or one who did more to guide her son to success. She took him as a kid and developed his talent and made a great comedian of him. She was a wonderful woman. And her laughter was always real. No matter how often she heard his gags, and she sat through four shows a day for a full week, that first week and frequently in the weeks that followed, every time Milton pulled one, she would laugh. She really enjoyed herself.

The Loew executives were quick to realize what an excellent comic he was so we played several more theaters to-

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gether. A few weeks later he was booked into Loew's State as a single at \$1,000 a week. From then on his career went straight up. I was always glad that that little old lady got to see the fruits of her devotion and efforts. To this day I judge the sincerity of a woman's laugh by comparing it with Mrs. Berlinger's (Miltie shortened the name to Berle).

I was running the Florentine Gardens in California a few years later when Berle was married. He phoned and said, "Granny, I'm going to have my wedding party at your club."

That evening about eight o'clock he came in with a group of twenty-four. As soon as they got seated I called out over the public-address system, "Hey, Miltie, when were you married?"

"At seven o'clock," he replied.

"It's now eight-thirty," I shot back. "That's an hour and a half shot to hell."

We hadn't worked together in eight or nine years, but it was obvious right away that we hadn't forgotten our old routines. We turned loose all the old bewhiskered material we could think of and had one of the most enjoyable evenings I ever knew.

Another time I was playing Chicago, and after my performance I dropped in at the Frolics to join a party that was being given for Wallace Beery. The Frolics was owned by a tough mobster named Denny Cooney and Denny was sitting at my table. Sometime during the evening the M.C. was introducing guests and he mentioned my name. Suddenly I heard a familiar voice coming from one of the balcony tables. I caught the barb and tossed it back and for several minutes then we pulled the old taffy. Denny Cooney jumped up and roared, "I'm gonna have that bum flattened!" He thought I was being insulted.

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"Sit down, fella," I said. "These gags are older than you are, and nobody ever got sore at them before."

Miltie was playing at the Chez Paree in Chicago and happened to drop in. It just goes to prove that sometimes the best audience for a straight man and his comedian is the straight man and his comedian.



# 16

## *Broadway Down on the Farm*

My mother, as I have said, was a large, strong-willed, peasant woman. My father was small, studious, and businesslike. He was a trader and he dealt mostly with Lapplanders. Mother butchered the hogs for our meat (and saved the blood which she mixed with gruel to form a sort of pudding—highly prized), made our clothes, and cooked the meals, and served as doctor, nurse, and counselor to all the Lapps within a thousand miles. She was a woman of the land, and her feeling for the things of the country is one of the strongest characteristics I inherited.

Many times in the course of a busy schedule I would experience something like a feeling of nostalgia, and as the pressures increased so did the feeling. I was never quite sure what I was feeling nostalgic for, but a drive through Central Park seemed to ease the pain a little. Then one day, returning from a trip to Boston, I decided that what I needed was a farm. I began a search that lasted for months and I must admit that the search was almost as much pleasure as the discovery. I looked for a place that would provide the quiet solitude and relaxation I was beginning to need. It had to be far enough from Broadway so I couldn't hear the noise, yet close enough to commute to my source of board and keep. Rose and I looked all over lower Connecticut and New

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York State and upper New Jersey. And you can't imagine the pleasure I had just tromping over prospective acres and looking at likely houses.

The discovery of my dream home was not anticlimactic. It was an old stone house, built long before the American Revolution, and it was surrounded by eighteen acres of land. There were two small lakes on it and a large wooded area of some 150 acres which I added later. And all of it about an hour's drive from Manhattan. It's a subdivision in Ramsey, New Jersey, today. But when I bought it one had to reach the house over a narrow dirt road, so it was completely isolated. That was my refuge from the wilderness of Broadway.

Ruby Keeler was our first guest, but in a short time "Granny's farm" became better known to Broadway than Broadway was to Ramsey. Practically every celebrity and half the chorus girls in the country visited the farm at least once while I had it, and many returned for "repeat engagements." As a matter of fact, people such as Ed Sullivan, the New York *Daily News* columnist, Lee Mortimer and Jack Lait of the *Daily Mirror*, Loew executives Charlie Moscowitz, Marvin Schenck, and Joe Vogel, and innumerable stars of stage, screen, and radio fame were regular "customers." And it was not unusual for some of these to share my table with such renowned gangsters as Harry Block, whose sudden death was a shock but no surprise, as I have told.

I employed a farmer and his wife to run the place and keep it provided with food. We raised chickens, turkeys, sweet corn, and a variety of vegetables the like of which few Broadway guys and dolls ever saw, or tasted. And if you think a bunch of chorus girls don't eat, well, I guess there wasn't so much emphasis on diets in those days. My wife Rose used to say we averaged a chicken per chicken. One of those Broad-



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way chickens really could put away a whole fried chicken in a day.

Perhaps the most unlikely "customer" we had was Lee Mortimer. Actually, I think he hated the quiet. He came only because there was no other place to go at four or five in the morning, for Lee was and still is a real Broadway night owl. He went for a walk on his first visit and promptly got lost. When I found him he was stuck in a swamp and he looked as though he was preparing to take a nap. I told him the place was infested with rattlesnakes. I carried a .22-caliber rifle which we used for target practice, and I began shooting into the weeds. Lee sprang up and clung to me all the way back to the house while I shot snakes right and left. I used up a whole box of cartridges, but it was worth it. Lee told everyone on Broadway how I had bravely protected his life in the wilds of New Jersey.

In addition to making the farm pay for itself and feed a regular influx of weekend visitors, I also found time to take some part in the local civic activities of Ramsey. To help put over a local charity one weekend, I brought out half of Texas Guinan's girls. The show we put on in the schoolhouse that Saturday night was something few of the local citizens ever saw before, or since. I'll bet there are old-timers in Ramsey who still talk about it.

One of the friends I made at that period was Mohammed Ali Ibrahim, brother of King Fuad of Egypt and uncle of the recently deposed King Farouk. Prince Ibrahim was about twenty-five, well educated, and tremendously wealthy. His playground was the world and his favorite corners were Hollywood and Broadway. He liked the night clubs and he was always surrounded by a bevy of the prettiest girls in town.

Everyone liked him and no one ever called him prince or highness or anything like that. To one and all he was "Deco."



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I don't know where the name originated, but that was what we all called him.

My wife and her sister Eileen acted as guides for Deco on the evenings when I was busy and one night I told them to bring him out to the farm after doing the night spots.

Deco came and no one ever had more fun than he did. Thereafter, whenever he was in New York, my farm became a sort of royal retreat, especially after he discovered applejack. Applejack, which we made from our own apples and which my friends called "Jersey Lightning," pleased Deco more than any of the \$25-a-bottle champagne he was getting in the city. I can still see His Highness, Prince of Egypt, sitting on the porch of the old house, swigging applejack from a brown jug. "This, my friends, is the only good liquor in America," he'd say, in a hearty booming voice. What a guy! I got a letter from him not long ago. He is living in Switzerland with a princess who looks like Hedy Lamarr.

Lord Milford Haven was another visitor we enjoyed. He dropped in to the Hollywood Restaurant one evening and I was busy so I told him to go on over to the 21 Club, and I'd meet him there as soon as I got through. The 21 was a speak-easy at that time and just beginning to be popular with playboys such as Milford Haven.

He was back in a few minutes. "Sorry, Granny," he said, sort of crestfallen, "but they won't let me in."

"Go back and tell them you're Lord Milford Haven," I said. "They'll let you in."

He left, and again he was back in a few moments. This time he was really put out. "Know what the doorman said to me, Granny?" I could imagine. We both had a good laugh and I closed up shop and took him back to 21.

Horseback riding and target practice were some of the sports we offered our guests at the farm. It was a lot of fun

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for me to watch some of my Broadway friends as they took part in these activities. Occasionally one would be an expert, but for the most part they were show people who had never been on a horse or handled a gun in their lives. One of these was Marion Martin, a fine performer and still in motion pictures.

Marion in those days was my central undraped beauty in one of the best night-club shows I had. She was a tall blonde who always wore a tremendous amount of make-up. When she came to the farm word was passed around that now, at last, we would get to see Marion without make-up. But the next morning she came down to breakfast made up just as she had been on Broadway the night before.

Marion said she would like to try shooting my .22 rifle and we set up some tin cans at the end of our little wharf. She missed every shot and finally one of the hoods who visited the farm occasionally pulled a gun from a shoulder holster and said, "Let me show you how to do it." And quicker than you could count he plugged every can. Then, just to show off, he tossed the cans into the air and shot each one before it hit the ground.

There is a little more to this hood's story than that, and since he is still around and since reformed, I'll have to call him Bill Doakes. I got acquainted with him first when he came into one of my clubs. I noticed two fingers were missing from one hand and he explained he had lost them in a gun battle. He said he was the personal bodyguard of Hymie Weiss, a rival of Al Capone in Chicago. Things had got too hot for him in the Windy City after Weiss was killed so he came to New York.

Bill Doakes was loud, easygoing, and goodhearted. Any time he heard of a chorus girl who needed money, he'd peel off a fifty or a hundred and give it to her, no strings attached.



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He never molested the girls, so in time he got to be a pretty frequent customer of my clubs and occasionally he would spend a weekend at the farm.

One early A.M. I was having supper in Dave's Blue Room, a late-hour hangout for people who worked in the clubs and night spots. Over in one corner was a table surrounded by some of the town's most important hoodlums. I knew some of them: Harry Block, Bugsy Siegel, and I think Frankie Marlowe was there. Harry Block came over and asked me to join "the boys." I pulled up a chair. Something was cooking, from the looks of things.

"You know this fellow Bill Doakes, Granny, we've just been talking about him."

"Uhuh," I said.

"We understand he's a Federal officer, and some of the boys think we ought to get rid of him. We don't want him snooping around."

"Look, fellows," I said. "As detectives, you're all a bunch of bums. Bill Doakes was one of Hymie Weiss's boys in Chicago."

"Yeah? Then why's he snoopin' round our clubs?"

"He's not snooping," I said. "He'd like to get into something here on Broadway, but he's well heeled so he doesn't care. He's just lonely. Take my word for it, he's no Fed."

The boys took my word for it and laid off Bill Doakes. I think in his peculiar way he appreciated what I did for him because he followed me around like a shadow.

Then one day he disappeared. I read a small item in the papers that said he had been picked up on an old charge and sentenced to eighteen months in jail near Worcester. A couple of months later I awoke in my apartment in New York to see Bill Doakes standing beside my bed.

"What are you doing here?" I said, sitting bolt upright and



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mentally calculating the time, eighteen months, and here it was only two or three months later. "What happened?" I asked.

"Take a look," he said, spreading the morning paper on the bed. There, under a Worcester dateline, and in black headlines, were the words, "NOTORIOUS CONVICT BREAKS JAIL." Farther down the page was another headline: "PANGBORN FLIES TO ROME."

"Whadda ya think of that?" he said proudly. "I got bigger headlines than a guy who flies to Rome!"

Well, the first thing he was going to do to celebrate his escape was throw a big dinner party at my club, he said. I talked him out of that in a hurry and it was a good thing. When I showed up at the club that night the place was half filled with plain-clothesmen, and cops were all over the block. They caught him a month later, in Miami. He and Tom Mix were pals and he had gone down there to visit Tom.

But Bill Doakes paid his debt to society, served out his term. He owns a jewelry store in Hollywood today, and, according to the authorities, is one of its finest citizens. I can believe that.

The farm fixed up that nostalgic feeling of mine and satisfied an inherent urge. I sometimes think I would have been just as happy as a farmer. True, I can make more money as an entrepreneur, and money brings its enjoyments. Besides, I meet a lot more people in show business, and I like people.

But the farm served another purpose, as often as it did to entertain my friends. It provided a haven for more than one poor kid who found the going tough and needed a little respite from the battle. I hope it doesn't sound like self-gloration to say that at least half our guests at the farm at almost any time were kids in this category. Maybe doing these things satisfied another inherent urge. I remember how

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my mother worked to care for the sick and the injured in our Lappland village; and later, in the United States, although we were very poor, she always managed to help her neighbors when they needed it. She never objected when I brought home a dirty, hungry kid for her to bathe and feed.

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For the record, and for the sake of historical accuracy, it was not the repeal of the 18th Amendment that killed the speak-easy business. The speaks were dying out by the end of the 1920's for the simple reason that they were choking the geese that laid their golden eggs. The suckers were getting wise, and the wise ones were developing an awareness of the racket the cabaret business really was.

Night clubs such as Texas Guinan's and the Silver Slipper and the hundreds of smaller spots in and around Broadway were small, tremendously expensive places. Their whole operation was based on the sale of liquor and liquor was illegal. The law hung over them like the blade of a guillotine. It was held off only by regular and generous pay-offs. More permanent fortunes were made by Prohibition agents than by night-club operators. It took a lot of money to run a speak-easy and the money had to come from the customers. Most of the speak-easies had cover charges. It cost two to five dollars just to get in and sit down in one of these joints. Only a man with a pretty hefty bank roll could afford such places.

I was in a good position to see every side of this business. I was a part of it as an important employee and I knew the owners and their day-to-day problems. I was a frequent visitor in other joints where I had no shows so I was familiar with



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the customers' (suckers') side of the racket. That is why I turned down every opportunity to go into the business on my own. Hardly a week went by, during the latter days after I had gained a reputation in the field, that I wasn't propositioned by some well-heeled gang lord. I wasn't interested. If I had to make my fortune by choking geese, I preferred to remain poor. The percentages, I figured, were stacked against me. And, besides, the geese were getting scarce.

On the other hand, there was a great big middle-class kind of goose that, if properly fed, might lay eggs in such abundance that it wouldn't matter whether they were golden or not. The idea struck me that there must be a lot of people who were potential customers for a place with a floor show, if they could only afford it. And don't misunderstand me; there was not much altruism in the thought. I felt simply that the operator of such a spot could make a mint out of the middle-income bracket. The gimmick was volume business, catering to quantity clientele. I envisioned a huge cabaret room, large enough to pay off on volume, and not so small that it had to peddle liquor to keep afloat. No contemporary trap with its postage-stamp dance floor could offer anything like it.

As an inducement, to lure the wary man of moderate means, my dream place would duck high prices, fancy foreign headwaiters, and excessive tariffs. I figured we could originate a "minimum charge," to supplant the highly resented exorbitant cover charge in other places. The customer would be charged this certain minimum against the price of the food or drink he consumed.

But for a long time the dream cabaret remained only a dream. N. T. G., the café show producer, could hardly foot the cost of a project like this. And the gang lords, who had the only risk capital for such a venture, were not interested unless liquor was included. Everyone to whom I confided my

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dream, like Big Frenchy and Owney Madden, for instance, promptly called me crazy.

Owney Madden was always telling me how grateful he was for my help in making his place a success. One day he said, "Tell you what, Granny. I'll back you up to a hundred grand for a place of your own."

I had a place in mind, I told him, and then I outlined the kind of cabaret I felt would be successful.

Owney looked at me as if I had suddenly gone off my rocker. "Look, Granny," he said, with a great show of patience, "you're a nice guy, but you're nuts. Cabarets make money on cover and liquor. They lose on food."

But I knew a guy who had all the answers on this food question and I went to see him. Jake Amron had been in charge of food at the once-fashionable Knickerbocker Hotel at Forty-second Street and Broadway. (He later built the famed Jack Dempsey's restaurant on Eighth Avenue.) I asked Jake how much it would cost to put out a six-course dinner. He said fifty cents.

Well, that was the clincher. A place that offered a floor show and dinner for a dollar and a half could make money, if it had volume. I told Jake about my dream cabaret. "You could do it," he said, "and without liquor." Then, like a bolt of lightning, his next words nearly floored me. "How would you like for me to go in with you?"

"Swell, Jake," I said. "I'd like nothing better, but it would take a bank roll."

"I've got it," he answered.

Things happened pretty fast after that. We found an ideal location. It had once been the second floor of Rector's, where Ted Lewis made his first sensational hit as a band leader. The place could seat 800 dinner customers without pushing out the walls. We decorated it with giant photographs of motion-



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picture stars and Hollywood sights and scenes, and named it the Hollywood Restaurant. The day before we opened, Joe Moss, a Philadelphia cabaret operator, came in as a third partner and brought additional capital. So we got off to a comfortable start. And that was the beginning of the big-time cabarets, the night-club business as it is known today. Lee Mortimer, writing in his New York *Daily Mirror* column, not long ago, officially fixed the credit for this historic item.

"N. T. G. is the conceiver, inventor, and creator of modern night life," he wrote. "And the Hollywood was the daddy of practically every cabaret in the business today."

The revolution we set off with the opening of the Hollywood changed the face of the Main Stem, and everywhere else where there were cabarets. The policy of elaborate shows and minimum charges is common practice today.

Amron took care of the food end of the business and I had a free hand in the entertainment part. I recruited some of the loveliest girls on Broadway and put together a chorus of two dozen that were unmatched on this street or any other. According to Lee Mortimer, "They were the most beautiful girls this side of heaven." I built the whole show around them and good dance bands.

We advertised a six-course dinner and floor show for a dollar and fifty cents. We served no liquor and we had no cover charge. It was the best bargain in New York—but for a solid month we didn't have any business worth mentioning. We knew what the trouble was, so we weren't discouraged. People simply couldn't imagine a cabaret show and a six-course dinner, all for a dollar and a half. No one had ever heard of such a thing. Weren't all cabarets just gyp joints?

I remember standing at the head of the stairs, wondering where the customers were, when a party came up hesitantly



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and stopped before the headwaiter. "Are you sure," they asked, "that we can get a dinner and see the show for one-fifty?"

The headwaiter assured them they could. "There are no extras at the Hollywood," he said.

Even after they ventured to sit down, they still doubted our word until the check came. The pleased expressions on their faces when they left was the trick that paid off. Word got around. People began to realize it was not a gag, and before the end of the first half year the Hollywood was paying off. It was the first spot anywhere to ring the bell without liquor. The hoods never bothered us because we never served it. And our shows were not competing with their shows because we went on much earlier. We added late shows, after we became well established, but even then they were for late diners, not drinkers.

After the snowball began to roll, we were packed nearly every night. And not everyone settled for the buck-fifty dinner. Many ordered more expensive food, which brought the profits up. Those customers who wanted to drink had to bring their own. But they ordered "setups," a bowl of ice and a small bottle of ginger ale. The bottles cost us three cents and we charged the customer a dollar. Even after the Wall Street debacle of 1929 we continued to do good business. We were one of the few places in town a man could afford. But it was far from being a poor man's joint. We had all kinds. One of our customers whom we highly prized (because he always brought along twenty or thirty heavy eating guests) was the internationally famous financier Otto Kahn. I remember how I ribbed him the first night he came in and how the girls came down and covered his face with lip rouge. I didn't know who he was, but he took ribbing so well that I

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kept it up off and on all evening. After he left and I found out who he was I half-expected him to buy out the place and burn it down. Instead, he was back a few nights later with about half the cast of the Metropolitan Opera. I took advantage of the opportunity to apologize but he grinned and said, "No, no, my boy. I must thank you. We had a great time." Naturally, I saw to it that he always had a great time at the Hollywood.

Right at the beginning I made a deal with Ziegfeld wherein our most talented girls could double in the *Follies*. We both paid top salaries and this arrangement gave the girls a really fabulous income.

One of the girls who doubled in the arrangement with Ziegfeld was Iris Adrian, a wide-eyed redhead who became the central figure in one of the zaniest love stories ever unfolded on Broadway.

Herman Amron, son of my partner in the Hollywood, fell in love with Iris. It was a very warm romance, and it covered a lot of territory. Iris took a summer off (still no air-conditioning) and went to Europe. Herman followed, showering her with gifts whenever she stopped long enough to gather them up. When they returned to the States, he began badgering his acquaintances in the movie industry to do something for her.

The beautiful redhead finally landed a contract with Paramount. She went to Hollywood and appeared in a picture with George Raft. But Herman, working in New York, began to be a little worried. Perhaps getting her this chance in Hollywood wasn't the best thing for their romance after all. Adulation and fame might disprove that absence makes the heart grow fonder. He bought an expensive opal bracelet and sent it to his lady love as a Christmas present.



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Herman didn't know it, but next to whistling in a dressing room, opals are pretty unlucky things in the acting profession. Iris put the bracelet on and the next day Paramount dropped her option.

It was more than a coincidence to Iris. The opals had jinxed her career. In a rage she smashed the bauble and sent it back to Herman. A few days later she married another man.

Herman, crestfallen, sent her diamonds, since he hadn't yet heard of her marriage. Her husband wasn't broadminded about such gifts, and in a short while they were divorced.

Iris, washed up in pictures and matrimony, returned to Broadway and night-club work. She was so successful that she won another bid to Hollywood and another film role. Then she married Georgie Jay, who owned an uptown club. But this romance didn't last long either because Herman happened to drop in one night when she and Georgie were sitting at a table. Herman went over to say hello. That night Iris and Georgie had a row that resulted in divorce.

Herman never did get the girl, but his gifts and his attentions seemed to keep anyone else from having her either. Had Runyon told the story, it would have been called the romance of Herman the Hoodoo.

It was in the Hollywood, too, that the story of the Bouncer and the Baby began. I found a little blonde girl in the German neighborhood of Yorkville and put her in the show. She couldn't dance, could hardly walk in tempo, but she was as delicate and tiny as a doll. The name I gave her, Baby, fitted her. Ziegfeld saw her and right away wanted her. She doubled in his lavish *Rio Rita* production.

One of our customers at this time was a big giant of a man who came in just to see the show. He was a bouncer at LaHiff's Tavern named Bernard Shor, and everyone called him Toots.



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Although Toots could hold the Baby in the palm of one of his big hands, it wasn't long before everyone around the Hollywood knew he was madly in love with our little blonde. And it was pretty obvious that she was just as nuts about him.

The love story of "the Bouncer and the Baby" is a Broadway legend today and Toots Shor's restaurant one of the most famous in the world. They have four children now and they've come a long way from the Tavern and Yorkville. But they haven't changed much. She is still the petite, fragile little doll. Toots is the same happy-go-lucky, lovable guy, who always did have a flair as a host.

Harriet Hilliard's story doesn't begin in the Hollywood Restaurant, but I got acquainted with her at the time I was associated in its operation. I was also still doing vaudeville shows in the theaters around New York that I could reach without too much trouble. A comedy act in one of these shows consisted of a young comedian and a girl who played it straight named Harriet Hilliard. He was pretty sharp, while she in her role took all the insults and did a sort of acrobatic dance, rolling around on the floor. But she was certainly miscast, I thought, for offstage she was a different person. She was charming and sweet and definitely not the show-girl type.

I hired the act for a week and throughout that time I felt this girl was suffering. She didn't say much, but she was unhappy, that was obvious. I figured it was because of the type of work she was doing.

The comic did a trick with a blank revolver in his act, and in the last performance of the week it went off accidentally, close to him. He was so badly burned that the doctor said he would have to be hospitalized for a month.

I drove the girl back to New York and we had hardly gotten into my car when her pent-up feelings broke and she

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began to cry. Sobbing hysterically, she told me all her troubles. She had no other bookings, she was supporting her mother, she was disgusted with the act she was in, and now even that was ruined because of her partner's accident. Obviously, she had hit bottom.

"Go on," I said, "have a good cry. And when you get through, I'll tell you something." She dried up soon after that, for no woman would exchange tears for curiosity. She looked at me through her dripping mascara.

"Beginning Monday, you are an employee of the Hollywood," I said.

"The Hollywood?" she asked. "What can I do?"

"You can earn a hundred a week, for one thing," I said.

"A hundred a week?" she asked. "But what can I do to earn all that money?" she persisted.

"That's my problem," I replied. "You get a hundred a week, starting Monday."

She was incredulous, but there was no gimmick in my proposition. She was more than a chorus girl, this Harriet, so I made her a sort of assistant M.C. for the last show each night. I taught her how to introduce acts. And I made her sing, although she had never sung before. I found a high stool, like the old-time bookkeepers used, painted it black enamel and gold, and put her on it. She wore a beautiful evening gown, and sat on this stool in front of the orchestra. With a microphone in one hand and a batch of little cards with lyrics printed on them in the other, she began a whole new career.

It was a novelty number. A girl singer with a band was something brand new. Band leaders began to drop in to hear her. Most of them remained to talk business and she got several offers to join their orchestras. One of these was an am-



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bitious young fellow who had just recently graduated from Rutgers University and was forming his own band. He was the only one who seemed to be making any headway with Harriet. They were seen together frequently and it was obvious that his interest was not entirely professional. He came to me one day and said, "Granny, can I talk to you?" We found a quiet corner and sat down.

"I don't know how to tell you this," he stammered. "You've made a star out of this girl, and she is valuable to you here. I know how much you've done for her and how much she means to you. But I'm in love with her. I want to marry her."

What could I say? He was an earnest, honest youngster. She was sweet and captivating. Obviously, they were made for each other. I gave them my blessing.

You know them today as Mr. and Mrs. Ozzie Nelson, or, more familiarly, as Ozzie and Harriet, that wholesome TV family.

By 1930 the Hollywood was at the height of its fame. (Ozzie Nelson, telling about his romance in a recent issue of *Redbook* magazine, said, "Anyone not familiar with midtown New York at that time would find it difficult to realize how glamorous this place [the Hollywood] was. I don't believe there ever were as many beautiful girls in one room at one time as at the Hollywood Restaurant that year.") Our shows ran a full year, practically without change. Most of the girls were with me for two or three years at a stretch. And the stock-market crash did not seem to affect our business, unless it was to increase it. In fact, my partners, Jake Amron and Joe Moss, felt it warranted expansion.

They leased a big estate about eighteen miles up Long Island Sound and turned it into a sort of suburban summer-time Hollywood Restaurant. They converted the old house into a kitchen and used the surrounding grounds as a huge



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open-air restaurant. They offered to let me buy in for a one-third share, but I didn't think the idea was worth such a big investment. There were only about a hundred nights a year warm enough for open-air operation, and some of those would be rained out. I told them I was satisfied with what I was making out of the Hollywood, but I would put in the stage show at the new spot. I also agreed to act as master of ceremonies, at a salary.

The new place was in a magnificent setting, on the shore of Pelham Bay. They named it the Hollywood Gardens. The tables were placed around a large oval stage and between the stage and the tables they dug a six-foot moat and filled it with water. Ducks and swans and fish cavorted here and all together it was a very picturesque place.

Opening night we featured Paul Whiteman's orchestra and the event was one of the highlights of the season. We had a chorus of twenty-four girls, all good dancers, but not so uniformly beautiful as those we had downtown. But then they didn't have to be. What with the moat and the waterfowl, they were too far away from the customers to be seen clearly.

The prettiest of the bunch was a plump little blonde. She was adorable and pert. Her name was Alice Faye. It was her first job in show business.

I watched her work, and one day soon after we opened I said, "Look, you're pretty cute and I think you could do something with that tap. Tell you what I'll do, I'll send you to a teacher and you learn an individual number to do in the show."

She argued she didn't want to do a solo number. She had seen me gag with the other specialty numbers. "If you get me out there alone, you'll make fun of me," she said.

Argument, I could see, was not going to get us anywhere,

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so I decided to lay down the law. "All right, then," I said. "Either you have that dance ready by Monday, or you don't have a job." She didn't know I was bluffing. I wouldn't have let her quit if she had wanted to. She had much too much talent for that. But she had to be pushed. And the following Monday she was ready to go on.

I took her by the hand and led her out on to the stage and the more I kidded her the more the customers loved her. She wasn't much of a dancer, but that didn't seem to matter. She went over big with the audience and I decided to give her another push.

"You're great," I said. "Now, next Monday you are going to add a song routine to the dance." Again I had an argument on my hands. She flatly refused to sing. "Even for an extra \$25?" I asked.

She grinned. "That's different," she said. Together with what I was paying her, it would make a salary of \$100. "For \$100 I'd sing standing on my head."

Alice sang, with Whiteman's best behind her, and my worst jibes and kibitzing in front of her, and the audience loved her every moment. And as the summer wore on she became more and more popular, and when we closed shop in the autumn, she was the only one from the outdoor show that I felt should be given a job in our Broadway establishment. My offer proved to be one of the biggest tests of loyalty I've seen in show business.

Rudy Vallee was a frequent visitor to the Hollywood Gardens that summer and I wasn't long in discovering why. He was interested in our little Alice. He and his orchestra were rehearsing with George White's *Scandals*, and Rudy was scouting for this show, though I didn't know until later that he had propositioned Alice. She went to work in the Hollywood and a few days later I was talking to Rudy.



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"Man," he exclaimed, "what kind of hold do you have over these girls?"

"What do you mean, 'hold'?"

"Well, I offered Alice Faye \$175 to appear in the *Scandals*, and she turned me down." He knew we were paying her only \$100.

"I didn't know you wanted her," I said, but I was pleased at this exhibition of loyalty. "I'll talk to her," I promised.

I did more than talk to her. Alice Faye was a girl who knew her own mind, and I had to put up quite a front of big-brother sternness to make her change it. "I appreciate your loyalty, Alice," I said, "but this is a real opportunity. Don't pass it up if you expect to get to the top in show business."

The rest of Alice Faye's story you know, but this you may not know: Alice Faye is one who never forgets a favor. Anyone who can call her and her band-leader husband Phil Harris friends is blessed indeed.

But lest anyone get the idea that running a cabaret, even a legitimate one, is a bed of roses and the discovery of starlets, let me illustrate.

During the season we operated at Hollywood Gardens I had to arrange my schedule to make both the restaurant downtown and the Gardens, eighteen miles away. I would finish the early show at the restaurant at about eight-fifteen, jump into my red Jordan roadster, and race uptown to make the show at the Gardens. The Gardens' show was held until I got there.

One evening I detoured for a quick stop at some friend's social and called Joe Moss at the Gardens to let him know I was en route, but a little late. Joe was wildly excited.

"Don't come, Granny!" he shouted. "Something's happened!"



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He hung up.

I contemplated the receiver in my hand, and wondered if all of them had gone crazy. I called back, but it was several minutes before the connection was completed. Joe had calmed down a bit by then.

"You can come on," he said. "It's O.K. now."

But it was so late by the time I got to the Gardens that I had to open the show. The place was filled with police, but there was no time for questions or explanations to clear up the mystery. It was not until the show was over that I was able to get to the bottom of it.

It seemed that someone had staggered into the place that evening with the word that something was going to happen to me. He was suffering from an injury on his head and half of what he said was unintelligible. It was enough, however, to frighten Joe Moss, for the gist of the message was that some of the gang lords were conspiring to kidnap me and hold me for ransom, or else. I was inclined to laugh it off, until I saw the fellow who had been injured and then I knew it was typical gangland tactics. He had risked his life to warn me, because, as he said, I had done a favor for his sister, though I never did find out who the sister was or his name either, for he died soon after he was taken to the hospital.

The police, however, did manage to get some names from him and it was pretty well established that Dutch Schultz was the top man behind the nefarious scheme. He was the only one who had anything against me, so far as I knew. I had crossed him once when he insisted on courting one of my girls. I warned the girl about being seen with him, but she would not drop the hoodlum and I fired her. Dutch never forgot it, or forgave me.

After my last show that night at the Gardens the police escorted me to my farm over in Jersey. But the following

### *A Cause for Rejoicing*

morning I was back in New York. I wanted to find out definitely who was after me. It is not a pleasant feeling to know that thugs are camped on your trail. Owney or his partner, Big Frenchy, would know, or could find out. I went to De Mange's office.

"I want to find out if it was Schultz," I said.

Big Frenchy picked up the telephone and called a number. "Hello, Dutch," he said. "Did you try to kidnap Granny last night?"

I could hear a sputtering reply in the earpiece, then Frenchy hung up.

"Dutch didn't do it," he said. "But he thinks it might have been Vince Coll and his mob. Coll broke away from him, and he doesn't know where he is. Coll is a wild man, Granny, and Dutch says to look out for him."

"Coll?" I gasped, amazed, and no little frightened. I was afraid of Dutch Schultz, but Vince Coll! The newspapers were labeling him Mad Dog Coll. Had he walked into the University Club on Fifth Avenue, the doorman could have been forgiven for taking him for a member. He was slim, with a freshly washed look and soft blue eyes, and he always wore blue serge and a tie striped with the red and blue of the University of Pennsylvania. He smiled easily and had fine white teeth and wavy auburn hair. Girls were nuts about him. They called him Baby-face. But the newspapers weren't calling him Mad Dog for this.

Actually, Vince Coll was the maddest mobster in New York. Possessed of enormous ego, he was the only man really feared by rival gangsters. He had been one of Schultz's hired gunmen, but through some disagreement with Dutch, he had branched off into his own racket. Schultz was probably not sorry to see him go.



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That would have been that, except that just before he left, Coll was picked up for carrying a gun. Schultz put up the \$10,000 bail, and Coll jumped the bond. The Dutchman lost the ten grand, and retaliated by killing Coll's brother, Peter. That, plus Coll's subsequent alliance with Legs Diamond, precipitated one of the bloodiest gang wars of the era.

Over a dozen murders were traced directly to Coll, and some of them were innocent bystanders, women and children. The papers were full of his exploits and of his hair-breadth escapes at court. It is necessary to tell only one of these to show what kind of animal he was.

In the early afternoon of a peaceful sunny July day in 1931, half-a-dozen children were playing around a penny lemonade stand on the curb in front of the Helmar Social Club in the overcrowded tenement section of East Harlem. Today's infamous 107th Street Mob, reputed to be narcotics headquarters, is located on the same street. Vice-president of the club was Vincent Rao, cousin of Joey Rao, a gunman notorious as the prisoner boss at the Welfare Island pen.

A solitary loungeur leaned against the building in the mid-summer heat. A large open car rolled slowly into the street. The loungeur sprang to life. He dropped to the pavement and rolled down a short flight of steps into a basement entryway. Suddenly there was the wicked bark of machine guns. Bullets smashed against the walls of the clubhouse. Screams tore the neighborhood. The big automobile rocked around the corner and vanished.

The lone loungeur got on his feet and left. Mothers rushed from the tenements seeking their youngsters. Little Mike Vengali, who was five, was dead. Three other tots had been wounded by the fusillade of bullets.

Police quickly decided that this was the work of Coll,



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gunning either for Joey or Vince Rao in his vendetta with Schultz. Eventually, the Mad Dog was indicted for murder. At the trial, his counsel was Samuel Leibowitz, an ace among criminal lawyers. (He is now a Brooklyn judge.) He tore the case against Coll to bits, and a verdict of acquittal was directed by the court. The Mad Dog walked out laughing. He turned at the door to the courtroom and literally guffawed at the judge, police, and witnesses.

After this the whole city was up in arms. As a result Schultz's warning to me, as relayed by Big Frenchy after the kidnap attempt, wasn't really necessary. I was shaking in my boots.

The next evening there was a phone call for me at the Gardens. "Hi, Granny," the voice said. "This is Vince Coll."

"Hi, Vince," I said. "What do you want?"

"You can give us a little contribution," he said, and his voice was as casual as though he were soliciting funds for the Baptist bazaar. "You know, Legs is indicted in Albany and we want to raise some dough to get him clear."

The nerve of the guy! Such effrontery made me mad clear through.

"We thought you might chip in five grand," he continued, and my ire boiled over.

I told him off in words he understood. "Did you try to kidnap me last night?" I demanded at the end.

He flatly denied it, but his claim didn't ring true. I knew he was the ringleader.

Fortunately for me, developments outside my knowledge were taking place. Legs was acquitted a day or two later, as I have told, and then was mowed down by the mob. Vince Coll made the mistake of kidnaping Big Frenchy and got the whole panel of gang lords down on him. A price tag was put on his head—and soon collected. The Mad Dog got

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his while making a call from a telephone booth, lured there by an elaborate setup devised by Dutch Schultz.

The death of Coll, it might be added, was a cause of almost universal rejoicing, among the law-abiding as well as the underworld. You can imagine my feelings.

# 18

## *The Paradise and a Little Finger*

I have always been of the opinion that if the gods employ no discrimination when they hand out talents, no mortal man should presume to discriminate in the enjoyment of them. Race, color, religion, or former condition of servitude never influenced my choice of talented entertainers nor my enjoyment of their work. Loew's orders were to employ anybody who could produce. The man's only prejudice was a dislike of ineptness, laziness, and carelessness. Even if I had been inclined to some petty prejudice, the influence of this man would have erased it all within my first year with him.

I had a little more difficulty with the night-club operators. There were a few who felt they had to maintain "certain standards" in order to keep their high-class clientele.

When I was boss of the shows in my own cabaret, I had no such interference. That's how some of the top colored artists of the day got their first breaks on Broadway. I think it began one evening when Bill Robinson, the great colored star, came into the Hollywood accompanied by the Mills Brothers, four Negro boys who were beginning to make a big name for themselves.

"Granny, the people in Harlem need coal and food," Robinson said. "We want to do something for them. Can we go on here for just what we can pick up by passing the hat?"



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I said I'd do better than that. I'd set a date for the show and advertise it.

It was a big night. When I introduced them on the floor, I remembered my advice to Jimmy Durante years before. "These boys are here for free," I said. "They want to raise money to help the poor people in Harlem. If you want to throw them some money, wrap it in the folding kind, it won't roll away and get lost."

I called out the bus boys after Bill Robinson did a dance and they swept up a pile for him. And when the Mills Brothers sang a few songs the place was snowing money. They went away with several hatfuls of it and the evening was so successful, for them, for the audience, and for the Hollywood, that all the other spots on Broadway opened up their floors and their hearts.

The important consequence of this little gesture was that resentment against the Negro entertainer in a white show virtually disappeared on Broadway.

The unprecedented success of the Hollywood, bearing out my conviction that the family man would support night life if he could afford it, resulted in fairly overrunning me with chances to make money. The "invention" of floor show and dinner at average-man prices brought in offer after offer to become a producer in other cabarets. In addition, the Hollywood show, with its comedy pace and stunning girls, was an attraction many theaters sought for their stages. My reputation and my profession, therefore, had gradually taken a new turn. I was known as a producer and it almost completely overshadowed my reputation as a publicist. I was making so much money out of one job that what I made working for Loew was hardly worth mentioning. I stuck with the Loew organization because I loved Nick and Joe Schenck and all my co-workers, but after seventeen years with them I gradually

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drifted into a whole new life. There never was a definite break with them. My outside work occupied more and more of my time and less and less was given to Loew, and finally my time and my pay check at Loew's stopped.

Those were seventeen full and friendly years with Marcus Loew, Nick and Joe and (nephew) Marvin Schenck, and from them I learned all I knew about show business. They were kind and helpful to the scared, skinny little Swede, and I never forgot it.

There was a tough hombre on Broadway in those days named Charlie Sherman. He was a meek-looking little man and most everyone called him Sheiky or Chink, and the newspapers said he was a very tough citizen indeed. His appearance, though, was anything but the popular conception of a thug.

Sherman was weak-looking, small, and pasty-faced. He spoke rarely, if at all, and always with some reticence. A lot of Broadway people, like Mark Hellinger, for instance, liked him. One could not believe he was all the things they said about him. They said, for instance, that he was a dope peddler and a gunman and a bootlegger and one of the hoods who was sponsored by Arnold Rothstein, the bank-roll man I have told about.

There was also the story of an incident one Saturday night in front of the Rivoli Theatre on Broadway, next door to the old Lindy's. A lone gunman was idling there. Suddenly a black sedan sped by, and a load of unidentified men unleashed their guns in a typical gangland sortie as they sped along. The man standing alone whipped out a pistol in each hand, ran into the middle of the street, and fired back at the fast-disappearing limousine. That lone gunman was Charlie Sherman, so they said.

How he earned his money he never told, which figured. He



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was reputedly connected with the Purple Mob of Detroit at one time, then had come to New York to look around and move in. He was hooked up with Waxey Gordon, the big baron of New York and New Jersey breweries. He got mixed up in a bloody feud with Dutch Schultz, who felt there should be no other beer baron but himself. For a while gangland identified him as a co-worker in the Bug and Meyer mob, run by Bugsy Siegel and Meyer Lansky. Some said Charlie ran dope. Later, I talked to him about that, but he maintained firmly that he hated the stuff and everything connected with it.

From my experience I can say I never met anyone more self-effacing than Charlie Sherman, or one more free with his money. Once, while I was still doing the show in the Silver Slipper, I was sitting in old Lindy's when Sherman came in. He sat down and in a few minutes our haphazard conversation turned to the situation I mentioned before regarding the end of the *Rendezvous*. That was the cabaret, remember, where Larry Fay, sated with ego, opened as a last resort after his gigantic night-club plans flopped. Fay insisted on producing the *Rendezvous* show himself. It failed promptly and he left the girls holding the bag for their salaries.

"Can you find out how much money is due them?" Sherman asked.

"You didn't own the show," I said. "That was Fay's funeral."

"That's O.K., Granny," he said. "Just find out what is coming to those kids and let me know."

I asked the girls, and the money due them was around \$1,200. I told Sherman and he peeled off twelve hundred-dollar notes and handed them over. "Pay 'em with that," he said, and turned and walked away.



## *The Paradise and a Little Finger*

That was about all I knew about Charlie Sherman before Mark Hellinger came in with him one night and took a table at the Hollywood. I went over and said hello.

"Sit down," Mark invited. "Charlie's got a proposition to talk to you about."

But it wasn't Charlie Sherman who talked. Mark did most of the talking and Charlie just sat by and nodded agreement. And the gist of the proposition was that Sherman was looking for an investment, an honest investment in a legitimate business. And the one thing he was interested in was a really big, brand-new cabaret, like the Hollywood, only bigger and fancier. Furthermore, said Hellinger, he wanted me to run it.

Well, the Hollywood was in its third year and looked as though it could continue at its successful pace for thirty more, but I was a little dissatisfied with my setup there. I was only a third partner, but the place was making so much money that I was satisfied financially. The thing that was troubling me was that partner Joe Moss was beginning to imagine himself an entrepreneur and interfering with the show. We had built a little gold mine on beautiful girls, sparkling comedy, good dance bands, and good food. He wanted to bring in big names in show business, spend more dough on one or two people, and let the rest go. I didn't agree that it would improve an already successful operation.

"You build the place," Sherman was talking now, "and I'll give you \$250 a week and 25 per cent ownership."

I said I wouldn't operate a place that sold liquor. I didn't want to get into anything that was illegal. He said I could operate any way I wanted to. It was all right with him, he said, if I made it a large-scale copy of the Hollywood. He made it plain that there were no strings attached to his proposition. He had the money to invest, and he wanted me to run the whole operation. That's all there was to it.

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So that was the deal. We had no written contract. The agreement was signed with a handshake, and Hellinger shook with both of us, as witness. The next day I met with my Hollywood partners, resigned from the firm, effective in thirty days.

A fellow named Jack Waldron took over as M.C. of the show the day after my last show at the Hollywood. And my last night there was memorable for I got the greatest tribute I ever received from show business. The show was just ready to go on when every one of my girls broke down in tears. We had to postpone the dinner show for two hours while the girls composed themselves and mopped up the mascara and make-up. No one can tell me show girls don't have hearts!

Although I had spent the past month looking for a location for our new restaurant, the day I left the Hollywood we still didn't have a spot. I looked up and down Broadway and covered the side streets for a block both ways. Then I found the ideal location and it was right across the street from where I started. It was on the second floor of the Brill Building at the northwest corner of Forty-ninth Street and Broadway, almost directly across from the Hollywood Restaurant.

We set to work immediately and at a cost of \$175,000 we set up one of the most beautiful clubs Broadway ever saw. It could seat 750 customers comfortably and we called it the Paradise.

Charlie Sherman gave me a free hand, and only occasionally offered any suggestions. They were never orders, just suggestions, and they were always good, as, for instance, the opening idea. It was his idea that girls especially imported from Hollywood, California, and seen on Broadway for the first time would be an attention getter. It sounded sure-fire.

Samuel Goldwyn had just put out a motion picture called *The Kid from Spain*, starring Eddie Cantor and the mar-



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velous (but ill-fated) Polish comedienne, Lyda Roberti. It was a sensational production, and it featured a line of perfectly stunning chorus girls.

I had an idea. I would fly out to California, recruit the girls, load an airplane full of them, including as many of *The Kid from Spain* chorus as would come, and fly them back to New York.

"How much will an airplane like that cost?" Charlie asked, reaching for his wallet.

"Nothing," I said, and his eyebrows shot up.

This was in 1931, remember, when the Pennsylvania Railroad controlled the forerunner of today's huge TWA network. President of the Pennsy was General Atterbury, a friend of mine from as far back as the Guinan days. I had an idea he could help us and help himself, too. I phoned him and explained my idea. He saw the publicity possibilities at once and agreed to supply a Ford tri-motored plane to be flown to California and back. If I would furnish the girls, he said, he'd furnish the plane.

"You'll need some walking-around money," Sherman said, still trying to pay for something. "Will this help?" he said, and peeled off \$3,000 and handed the roll to me. I was getting a good education in the way a free-handed gangster operated.

My arrival in Hollywood was the occasion for a lot of publicity and fanfare, and a crowd of old friends from Broadway were on hand to greet me when I landed. Among them, I recall, was the beautiful Jean Harlow. Jean and I had worked together on Loew vaudeville.

Busby Berkeley, today a veteran director of many movie classics, agreed to help me round up the beauties. He had directed the chorus of *The Kid from Spain*. Sam Goldwyn and Eddie Cantor also gave their cooperation, for the publicity was good for their picture. We rented the Roosevelt



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Hotel ballroom and sent out a call for chorus girls from the Goldwyn picture and others who might want to go to New York. More than 150 pretties showed up.

Jean Harlow came in and sat with Bus Berkeley and me at the interview. Berkeley explained that I was offering a six-month contract at \$100 a week, to work in a cabaret chorus on Broadway. I also agreed to provide return fare, via air, for any who wanted to return to California. But the girls were skeptical. This was three or four times what they were used to getting in Hollywood, and I was unknown to them. I could see how most of them were thinking. They were taking a chance on getting paid, and it was a long way from home. And this was in the day when girls had no organized protection against crooked producers.

I was trying to think of something more to say, to prove my honest intentions, when Jean spoke up. "Girls," she said, "I know Granny. I know what he stands for, and I know his reputation on Broadway. If any of you take this job and find that Granny has broken his promise, I'll personally make good on it. If he says he'll take care of you, take my word for it, you're safe."

That did it. From then on it was simply a question of picking and choosing the right girls. We loaded the plane, and took off for New York. We spent the night in Kansas City, and reached New York the next afternoon. We had arranged a party for them at the Paradise and from then on these girls were treated as they had never been treated before. In Hollywood, at that time, chorus girls, extras, minor young people in films, and particularly the girls, were shown little respect. In New York these girls were treated like ladies, as they deserved, and they lapped it up. You never saw such a happy bunch, and, of course, it reflected in the kind of shows they gave.

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And the little man whose money backed it and made it all possible never met the girls or even asked to. In fact, Charlie Sherman wouldn't allow his name to be used in connection with the enterprise. But he always knew what was going on. He came in one day during rehearsal. "Do these kids need any money?" he asked. "Let them have anything they want, Granny." He never personally met any of them.

The Paradise was a tremendous success from the day it opened. It paid back its original cost within the year, and a depression year at that. The opening orchestra was Abe Lyman's, then at the peak of his popularity. But the sensation was the chorus of thirty girls. It became the most fabulous line Broadway ever saw. Lee Mortimer, the unofficial historian of the Paradise, reminiscing in his column not long ago, had this to say: "There just never were any gals like the original Paradise kids. Granlund flew from Hollywood. Nightly, the headwaiter's heart was gladdened by big spenders, Wall Street Blue Sky artists, and scions of what was known as 'the idle rich.' Most of the show cuties had sables to cover their minks, and at least two of them rode to work in chauffeur-driven Rolls-Royces. I might add that no self-respecting playboy would go out with a frail unless she worked at the Paradise."

With a good hotel room in midtown costing the girls only ten dollars a week and no meals to buy (there was always someone around to feed them), they got along pretty well on their hundred a week. In addition to that, there was no rule against a girl accepting gifts from her friends. I wouldn't let them sit with the customers, but they could meet them at the stage door. And I insisted on deportment becoming a lady, and no publicity that might hurt the Paradise. I had to fire a couple of the girls right after we opened, and Sherman gave them plane fare back to California. But most of them were



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with me for two or three years or more. Their popularity frequently had them on the horns of a dilemma. "Granny," they'd cry, "what am I gonna do? I got three boy friends sitting out there tonight. I don't know which to go with."

These were the girls whose malapropisms and repartee kept the Main Stem alive with anecdotes and originated the "Dumb Dora" sobriquet that became legendary. There was British-born chorine Vera Milton, for instance. An item in the newspapers not long ago said she died in St. Clare Hospital of pneumonia following surgery. Her husband, said the item, sought funeral aid from Vera's friends. Lee Mortimer remembered her as she was in the old days when she was the star Dumb Dora of our chorus. This is from a recent column of his:

Blonde Vera Milton was the most famous chorus girl on Broadway. Her claim to immortality was not based on dancing or singing or even extreme beauty. Nor was she publicized as a divorcée, gun moll or other participant in some scandal.

Vera, at twenty-two, was already a Main Stem legend because she was known as the "Dumbest Girl on Broadway." She earned that reputation the hard way. She could always be counted on to do or say the wrong thing at the wrong time.

Some uncharitable folks thought she was putting it on. They said no one could be that dumb, not even an English girl. When they found her making romance with a clever press agent by the name of Irving Hoffman, they were doubly certain this was the phonus balonus, because this Mr. Hoffman used to write down her dumb sayings and send them to columnists, and no doubt he elaborated.

Those who thought she was acting dumb pointed out



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that her name and picture were always in the dailies, and consequently she was getting plenty of work in swell choruses.

Vera could be counted on to get off at least one malapropism a day. For instance:

One night while driving through the park in a taxi, her new boy friend let his arm rest negligently on her shoulder, while he gave her the old buildup.

"You have marvelous potentialities," he said.

"Hush," Vera cautioned. "The driver might hear you!"

I hired Vera for my Paradise show and the first night I saw her studying the schedule posted backstage.

"I can't do that number," she said, pointing to one of the lines in the order of the show. "I didn't rehearse it."

"Which one?" I asked, scanning the program.

"That one," she said, and she had her finger on the word "Intermission."

But the Dumb Dora tradition has become a thing of the past. As Mortimer says, "Frails now prefer to be known as the brainy type."

Perhaps the smartest of the Dumb Doras was Sylvia McKaye, a slight blonde who used to dance at the Paradise. She came up with her sidesplitters so regularly that I dubbed her Miss Unconscious. I even introduced her on the floor by that title. It was not plain Unconscious or any shortening of the name; just the formal Miss Unconscious. She would have resented any other name.

One evening a friend told her dolefully of a sailor who fell overboard and was devoured by sharks.

"That's terrible," she mourned. "Was the poor fellow hurt?"

Another time, as the girls waited to make their entrance,

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Jack Naples, my floor-show manager, said he thought Miss Unconscious had been drinking, and he knew how to prove it.

"Quick," he demanded, "which is your left hand?"

She pondered a moment. "I can't tell you; I left my wrist watch in the dressing room."

I was intrigued. "What does your left hand have to do with your watch?"

"I always know where my left hand is," she blandly confessed, "because I wear my watch on it."

"And what did you do before you had a watch?"

That was easy. "My mother tied a hair ribbon on the left side of my head."

Miss Unconscious was in my shows for the better part of ten years, and not just for laughs. No one was more loyal and she never missed a rehearsal or a show. Two or three years after the Paradise opened, I sent her with a show to Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro. It was a deal engineered by my Argentine playboy friend known to one and all as Macoco.

Macoco was a Broadway byword in that hectic era. His particular pals were Bill Leeds, the tin-plate heir, and John Perona, owner of the fashionable El Morocco cabaret. Broadway was Macoco's life. He loved night clubbing, sitting around the smart spots, and, of course, with four or five of the loveliest at his table.

When the depression set in in this country it hit Macoco pretty hard, too, for they also had something of the same thing in Argentina. Macoco had to go home and leave his beloved Broadway because he couldn't get any more money out of the Argentine. But after a few months he had a brilliant thought. Macoco couldn't go to Broadway; but why not bring Broadway to Macoco?

He made arrangements with the Atlantico, a first-class night club in Buenos Aires, and I sent him a whole show,



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chorus, specialty numbers, and all. My assistant, Jack Naples, was put in charge, since I was tied down with the Paradise, and a few weeks later I got a frantic cable from him. The girls, he said, refused to work. They missed performances and practically no one came to rehearsals. The pretties, it seemed, were too busy being wined and dined by rich, handsome young Argentine muchachos. Then a day or two later I got another cable. Everything was straightened out, he said. Miss Unconscious had taken over as his assistant and she had browbeaten the girls back into line. What a gal! I thought. Evidently she's got something in that pretty cranium besides air.

Nearly a decade later, when I was running a night club in Hollywood, Miss Unconscious was still in the show. She got a little homesick for Broadway, though, and one day she said, "I'm tired of this place. I think I'll go back to the United States."

I pointed out to her that Hollywood was in California and California was in the United States. "Oh, that's right!" she exclaimed. "We are in the United States!"

"How come you didn't know that?" I asked.

"Well, Granny," she mused, "every time I leave New York for you I'm in some foreign country. I went to Canada and then you sent me to South America and to London. Isn't that a good reason I'd think California was a foreign country?"

Once she asked me, "Granny, when does my contract exterminate?"

Secretly, I think she realized such dillies made her famous, and fame contributed to financial gain. And when it came to finances, she was anything but unconscious. I never met anyone, any chorus girl, at least, who saved money the way she did. She was never known to go to a hairdresser, rarely



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had a cleaning bill, and spent very little on clothes. Yet she was always immaculately dressed and in the latest fashion.

I see her in pictures occasionally. She is married to Bill Tinsman, a Hollywood producer.

But of all the stories I like to tell about the babes on Broadway, the story of *The Golden Girl* rivals anything I've ever read in fact or fiction.

I was always on the lookout for new talent for the *Paradise*, and one day an agent urged me to take a look at a girl appearing in the Irving Place Theatre, at Fourteenth Street. The Irving was one of the worst burlesque houses in the country.

I went, finally, on the agent's persistent urging, and the girl he wanted me to see was terrible. I wouldn't have hired her to sweep out the kitchen. But as I started up the aisle, thoroughly exasperated, a small chorus of eight girls pranced out on stage. They wore a little blotched silver paint and tiny G-strings and nothing more. Their breasts were bare. I glanced at the line and my eye came to rest on one girl in particular. She had one of the most gorgeous figures I'd ever seen. Her beauty was startling. That one, I thought, could make it on Broadway, or anywhere else.

I watched from the back of the theater until the number was off and then I asked the manager if I might talk to the girl.

"I'd like to see her get a break," he said. "Come on back."

She looked up at me with the biggest eyes I ever saw. The manager introduced us. Rose Zelle, he said her name was, and I told her I'd like to give her a tryout at the *Paradise*.

"Do you really mean it, mister?" she said. "Could I really play the *Paradise*?" I never heard such longing in anyone's voice before.

"Come and see me tomorrow afternoon," I said.

The dingy little waif who walked into the *Paradise* the

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next day certainly looked like she could use a good job. She wore no make-up and she had on a ragged brown coat that was faded and long out of style.

She was only sixteen, she explained in our interview. She had two sisters and they were all in burlesque, at three-fifty a day, if and when they worked. Her name was Rose Zelle Rowland.

I had an idea. She would be a sensation presented in paint, as I had first seen her, only I would put her in gold from head to foot, and build a big production number around her. She said she knew how to apply the paint and she was enthusiastic about the idea.

We had to have a special dressing room for her and finally found a small space off the storeroom. We got a huge tin tub and I tipped a bus boy each week to see that she had three pails of hot water at the end of each performance, to remove the paint.

I wanted to see her sisters and I wanted to know a little more about her family. Besides, I knew Charlie Sherman would want to know if any of our girls were suffering any hardship. I visited her family. They lived in the Century Hotel, a drab theatrical hotel off Broadway. Wash hung on lines across the table, and there was hardly room to sit. The three girls and their mother shared one cramped little room. One of the sisters, who was thirteen then, is today the widely known Betty Rowland, the "Ball of Fire" of burlesque. The other sister was Diane.

Rose Zelle was never known by her real name after she hit Broadway. Because of the gold paint she appeared in, I billed her as The Golden Girl, and she was never known to anyone in the show as anything but Goldie. Everyone on Broadway soon was calling her that, and today even her sisters call her Goldie.



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All three of the sisters had wonderful figures, but I do not believe human form ever surpassed the one we called Goldie. She had the most perfect bosom I have ever seen. Breasts widely spaced, high and firm. Today's fashion and fetish could not improve on what nature bestowed on this girl.

We staged her act on a huge pedestal that stood about four feet above the stage. She did her entire act standing on this, and in dramatic slow motion performed a spectacular acrobatic dance with infinite grace. Her only costume was the coat of gilt and one patch.

She was identified only as The Golden Girl, and the mystery of her identity and the daring of her act soon made her the talk of the town. She never wore make-up offstage, so no one ever recognized her.

I bought her a new coat and some decent clothes and one evening she asked me to let her sit out front and watch the rest of the show. I fixed her a place at my table and she was sitting there in her new clothes and no make-up, as usual, when Ed Sullivan, the New York *Daily News* columnist, walked in.

"Granny," he said, "I want to get a story on this Golden Girl. Who is she? What's her background? Everybody's talking about her."

I said, "Have a seat, Ed." He pulled up a chair and I introduced him to Rose Zelle. He half-glanced at her, acknowledging the introduction, and turned back to me.

"She's the most gorgeous thing on Broadway," Ed said, ignoring the plain-looking girl sitting across the table from him. "I've got to meet her and get her story."

"O.K.," I said, with all the nonchalance I could command, "you've met her."

"Huh?" he said.

I nodded toward the girl sitting between us.



## *The Paradise and a Little Finger*

Ed Sullivan not only wrote about little Rose Zelle, but as he was just then organizing a variety unit for the stage at Loew's State, he signed her for it. The act played a full week there. As I recall, Eleanor Powell, later famous as a film dancer, was in the same company.

In 1934 a group of English producers came to this country looking for a show for the Dorchester Hotel in London. They spent a lot of time looking and finally put the job in my hands. They had only one requisite. They had seen *The Golden Girl* and had all but swooned. "We must have her," they insisted.

"You're crazy, gentlemen," I argued. "You can't put this act into the Dorchester. In the nude, like this, the girl is great. Put clothes on her and the whole effect is gone. How can you have a nude in one of the swankiest hotels in London?"

They persisted, nevertheless, and signed Goldie at \$200 a week.

That is the end of her story in so far as my part in it is concerned, but I read the rest of it in the frequent newspaper accounts that appeared on both sides of the Atlantic. You may remember it. Goldie became one of the most popular show girls in London. And then this innocent little girl, always so plain and so shy, became one of the many enamored of Baron Jean Empain, a Belgian who was one of the wealthiest men in Europe.

The Baron, frequenting the Dorchester almost every evening, fell for Goldie in her paint. She went for a cruise through the Dalmatian Islands and the Aegean Sea with him aboard this yacht, the *Heliopolis*. Soon after this a story broke in the New York papers that she was about to have a child, and the Baron had agreed to marry her if the child was a boy. This was amazing news, since the Baron was notoriously

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opposed to the institution of marriage, and it was amazing news to me who knew Goldie from away back.

In due time the child arrived, and it was a boy. The Baron made good his word and it turned out to be a happy and wonderful union.

When World War II broke out, the Baron was imprisoned in Spain. Goldie set out to join him. She trekked across France hitchhiking and by bicycle and any way she could travel, until she got to Spain. The Baron, however, died in a concentration camp. Goldie made it back to France and after the war she married the Baron's cousin, Edouard Empain. She inherited the Baron's vast financial empire and she now lives on a huge estate in the ancient Château Bouffmont, about twenty miles outside Paris. Her son is now seventeen, and she has an adopted daughter who is nine.

So little Goldie, of poverty and dirty burlesque, of golden paint and the Paradise, has become one of the wealthiest women in Europe. Through the years she has sent me occasional notes, always grateful, always ending "...and if you ever need anything, Granny, please let me know."

But little Goldie wasn't the only one who stayed in Europe. About half the girls I took to the Dorchester married and remained in England. It was the best indication of our popularity I can mention, although my personal enjoyment of the trip can hardly be measured by any such standard. My wife Rose and my sister-in-law Eileen were my assistants on this trip and we never enjoyed a tour anywhere so much as we did this one. The British may be cold and unfriendly to some people but they were not to us.

My friendly association with the British actually began in New York when the group of London producers asked me to put together the show for the Dorchester. The group included Sir Francis Towle, tall, deep-voiced, dignified, and



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Sir Malcolm McAlpine, tiny, white-haired, in his seventies, and Major Cliff Whitley, red-faced, typically British.

I was doing quite a lot of charity benefits these days and I took the distinguished British gentlemen with me on several occasions to give them an opportunity to see how I put a show together, and to see my girls in action. Once I took them with me to Sing Sing when I put on a show there for Little Moe Sedway, Big Frenchy De Mange, and some of "the boys" who wanted to honor Owney Madden. (Owney had voluntarily returned to Sing Sing, remember, to serve out his sentence like a gentleman, for a perfectly justifiable homicide.) We rode up in several busses hired for the occasion, along with the entire Paradise band, our chorus and principals, and a lot of "extra talent," friends of Owney and other Sing Sing inmates.

A couple of frowsy blondes sitting in the back of our bus attracted the attention of my British guests. Sir Francis Towle saw them and turned to me with a worried look on his face. "Are those girls going in your company to England?" he inquired.

"Oh, no," I hastened to assure him. "They're just friends of some of the prisoners. They're going up to see their boy friends."

"Oh," said Sir Francis, much relieved. "Gun molls, eh?"

He was obviously getting such a kick out of the trip and was so thrilled over the prospect of actually meeting some real honest-to-goodness gangsters that I didn't disillusion him. (The British press was always generous with its space where American gangster stories were concerned and Englishmen generally had the idea that half our population belonged to the mob.)

Well, they not only met gangsters but I seated them in the second row of the Sing Sing auditorium and they were com-



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pletely surrounded by some of the toughest characters the place ever housed. They were still talking about the experience weeks later and boasting about it to all their friends in London.

Our show in Sing Sing was, naturally, a huge success. What the British producers didn't realize was the fact that we had a captive audience (no pun intended), an audience that was starved for a look at anything feminine.

But I had no complaints about our reception in London either. As a matter of fact, my trip to England was one of the most enjoyable and most extraordinary things that ever happened to me. From the day we landed until I literally fell into bed on the *Berengaria* for the trip home, we were wined and dined and treated with such affection that I shall never forget it. Naunton Wayne, who helped with the show at the Dorchester, Tommy Webster, the ubiquitous cartoonist and columnist, Lord Milford Haven, and the Lords Brecknock, Donegal, Castleross, and others gave me the wildest ten days of parties and receptions I've ever known. And the show, as I said, was a happy success. I came away with the impression that the British are a warmhearted, generous people—the salt of the earth. And for a year or two afterward I was kept busy sending them replacements for girls who married and dropped out.

Just about every night was carnival night in the Paradise, and what made it most pleasant for me was the fact that no one interfered with my shows. After the would-be experts who had fumbled and bumbled and got in the way in some of the other spots, this was a distinct revelation and a pure joy. Night after night Sherman would drop in, sit back in a corner but make no effort to take any part in the conduct of the show or the business.

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Generally, after the performance, we would leave together. Sometimes we'd stop off at the Napoleon Club, a monumental speak-easy in a former millionaire's home on Fifty-fourth Street. Sometimes it would be Sherman Billingsley's Stork Club, which even then was one of the finest speaks in New York. Or we would drop in at 21, or the Ubangi, a Harlem hot spot. One of the singing waiters in the Ubangi was worth the price of admission any time. His name was Billy Daniels.

One 5 A.M. Charlie and I were sitting in the Abbey Club, a place Texas Guinan opened originally years before. Suddenly we noticed an empty table across the room had new customers. Dutch Schultz and half a dozen of his ugliest were sitting down. Charlie didn't make a move that would indicate the turmoil that must have been going on inside him, but I knew that of all the enemies Charlie had, Dutch was considered his deadliest. The situation looked like something out of a thriller movie. Other customers, recognizing the Dutchman, glanced at us and began quietly to pay their checks and walk out. In a moment more the room would be empty except for our two tables, on opposite sides of the room.

Charlie and I were near the door to the kitchen, which had a rear exit. "Let's get out of here," I said. "We can slip through the back."

"No, Granny," Sherman spoke quickly. "I'm going to sit here as long as he does."

"Charlie," I pleaded, "they've planned this. They're going to get you. Let's call the police."

"Leave the cops out of this," he growled. I knew better than to cross him. The code of the mob said you fight your own battles.

"Get out, Granny," he said. "Take it casual-like, but get." I had never done anything that displeased him and I knew



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now that if I stayed I would only complicate the situation more. I got, as unobtrusively as I could.

The afternoon newspapers carried the whole story. Schultz and his men didn't use guns. They were afraid the noise would bring the police. They were more subtle. They came at Charlie with knives and broken ends of bottles.

But Charlie was not so chary. He knew that Schultz wore a vest of steel mesh, so he pulled his pistol and shot Dutch through the shoulder, where the vest did not protect him.

When the Dutchman's mob finally left, Charlie was a bloody mess. The tendons of one hand were cut through where he had tried to grab a knife and part of his nose was gone. There were cuts and lacerations about his head and the whole upper part of his body and arms. He was in the hospital for weeks, and when he finally did come back to the Paradise his hand was permanently mutilated. The tip of the little finger was bent against the palm in a crooked, deformed manner.

A few months later Schultz and two of his henchmen were shot to death in the back of a taproom in Newark. And it wasn't long after this that Charlie himself went for a ride.

We were sitting in the back of the Paradise one evening around seven o'clock when the headwaiter came over.

"There are some men downstairs in a car who want to talk to you," he told Sherman.

"Well, Granny," Charlie said, as matter-of-factly as though discussing the weather, "this is it."

I guess the fear I felt inside must have shown on my face.

"If I get out of this," he said, "I'll be O.K. If I don't, it's been a pleasure knowing you."

"So long, Charlie," I said, and we shook hands.

I didn't know any of the details of his feud, for Charlie never talked about it. But I knew that at last all the chips



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were down. Charlie had to take his chance, win or lose. He got into the car waiting below, and no one ever saw him again.

Months later a crumbling skeleton was unearthed under the dirt floor of a barn up in the Catskills. It had been buried in a pit of quicklime and all of the flesh was burned away. All of it, that is, except the tip of one little finger, a deformed, twisted little finger, pressing against the palm of the hand.

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## *Some Figures on Some Figures*

The Paradise was never the same after Sherman left. Lawyers, representing his estate, took over the management, but Sherman did things no barrister could. Such as seeing to it that certain clientele, like Pretty Amberg, for instance, stayed away.

Everyone on Broadway knew Pretty Amberg. He was called Pretty for a very obvious reason. He was one of the ugliest humans imaginable. And he was about as ugly inside as he was outside. He had some connection with the iniquitous Murder, Inc., and was a partner with Lucky Luciano in many of his crimes. After Sherman was killed, the Paradise's protection against invasion by such thugs was gone. One evening Pretty Amberg came boldly in with a muchly overdressed blonde and took a front-row table.

I came out on the floor, leading a pretty by the hand, to introduce the show. (The girl was Dixie Dunbar, recently one of the three masked Old Gold Girls, whose twinkling legs danced under giant cigarette packages in the popular TV commercial.) As we passed close to Amberg's table, he made a remark so vile that I all but blushed myself. I turned on him and before I could think I had given him the worst dressing down I ever gave anyone in public. The whole gist

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of it was what I thought of hoodlums in general and him in particular.

His gargoyle face froze in a stare of intense fury. "I'm gonna get you," he blurted viciously.

I went on with the act, but I was shaken. Amberg was known as a killer, with a reputation as a torturer. The lawyers who were trying to run the place heard me tell him off and they urged me to get out before he started anything. They didn't want the place cluttered up with my blood.

But there was one thing I had learned in my long acquaintance with hoods such as Amberg. Most of them are latent cowards and if they are going to attack they always pick a time and a place where all the advantages are on their side. Nevertheless, and as some means of self-protection just in case, I went out to the kitchen and got a big butcher knife which I held under my coat by pressing my left arm against it.

I was standing near the headwaiter's desk a while later when Amberg and his dame started to leave. To my astonishment, he came up to me and stretched out his hand. "Granlund," he said, "I didn't mean it. I'm gonna fergive you."

"Forgive me, Pretty?"

"Yeah. I'm not gonna hurt you, because the little broad here tells me you're a good guy. So you and me are gonna be friends. Let's sit down and have a quart of wine." We did.

In my show at that time was a girl I had discovered at a benefit, and if ever there was talent in show business, it was in this kid. Her name was Una Westmorelanda. She was a brunette, with that inky kind of hair, ivory-white skin, and eyes the color of a June sky. She was about as tall as half a minute, and only fourteen when I first met her. She was too young for night-club work, so I had her play a few theaters. Later, when she was old enough for the Paradise, I changed her



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name to Una Villon, because Una Westmorelanda was too long to fit on the bill.

One evening she went out on a date and some of the other girls in the show said her escort was Pretty Amberg. The next day I asked her if she knew whom she was cavorting with.

"A nice man named Mr. Cohn," she said.

Una was only fifteen and so innocent that she did not realize the danger she was getting into. All she knew was that "Mr. Cohn" was a very nice man and he had bought her one of those big dolls the cigarette girls peddle at night clubs. She was pleased at this, and well she might have been since she was hardly out of doll-playing days. But I discouraged any further association with Pretty Amberg and so far as I know that was the only date she ever had with him.

Una and her singing and dancing were billed as a little bundle of dynamite and she became a hit all along Broadway. Later she changed her name again, to Rita Rio, and was leading lady in a musical. From there she went to Hollywood and played opposite Eddie Cantor in *Strike Me Pink*, a lavish production in which she led three numbers.

This picture was just being released when Pretty Amberg's body was found hacked to pieces in Brooklyn. Barney Ruditsky, the famous Broadway detective, searched Amberg's room and found a note signed by Una, whom he knew to be Rita Rio. It said, "Dear Mr. Cohn: Thank you very much for the nice doll you sent me." It was a childish little note and so naïve that it touched even the hardened Amberg, obviously, for he had kept it.

The newspapers picked it up though and made headlines of it. "Movie Girl Gun Moll," they called Rita. Since she had worked for me, newsmen came to me for further information. I told them they were on the wrong track. Rita, I said, was

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more innocent than they, and to my knowledge she hadn't seen the gangster more than once in her life.

It was almost impossible for girls in show business to avoid meeting gangsters in those days. Girls such as Marion Roberts and Hilda Ferguson became identified with the underworld, but most of them had sense enough to back away before they were burned. In Rita's case, it was simple stupidity, caused by her own innocence. She didn't even know she was playing with fire. But the publicity she got was just as bad as if she had been guilty. The notoriety did her film career no good.

She came back to Broadway and I put her back in my show and she soon became such a hit that she was the highest-paid girl on the bill. To avoid the bad publicity that accompanied the name Rita Rio, we changed her name once more, to Dona Drake. And before long Hollywood was back, knocking on her door again.

At first Dona told the film moguls she was not interested, which, of course, made them all the more anxious to sign her. Eventually, however, she returned to Hollywood and no doubt you have seen some of the very fine work she has done.

While she was still in my show at the Paradise, I took her and some other entertainers to play an engagement in Baltimore. An old friend of mine, famed writer Courtney Riley Cooper, was in the audience and after the show he invited us all to visit him in Washington. He sent a car for us the next day and we spent an enjoyable time in the Capital. I knew Cooper was working on a series of F.B.I. stories at the time, so I asked him if we could visit the Bureau. He not only took us on a tour of the Bureau but he introduced us all to Chief J. Edgar Hoover. I had met the Chief, during one of his occasional visits to Broadway. I asked the aide who was acting as our guide if we might have a look at the dossier on Pretty



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Amberg. The aide got the file and opened it. And according to the F.B.I. record little Dona's friend had committed about seventeen murders. I imagine her nice "Mr. Cohn" looked quite different to her after that.

So you can understand how life in the Paradise began to sour after Charlie Sherman's demise in a lime pit. His successors just didn't have the knack to run a cabaret like the Paradise, and they weren't willing to give me the free hand I had had with Sherman. It soon became pretty obvious that the Paradise had fallen on evil days. I had had over three big years in the merriest play spot on Broadway, but now the handwriting was on the wall.

Meanwhile, my reputation as a showman had grown to such an extent that I was getting calls not only from the metropolitan New York area, but from houses all over the country. For a guy who never was an actor, who had no ambitions in that direction, I was doing all right. In fact, the thing I had always avoided, the public presentation of my own talents, was turning out to be a gold mine. Offers of \$5,000 a week were not uncommon. I received \$1,000 a week for a year from J. Walter Thompson and Bromo Seltzer for a half-hour once-a-week show.

There was no financial risk, therefore, in severing my connections with the Paradise. A few months after the new management took over, I put on my hat and walked out of my last big stand on Broadway.

I took my pick of the Paradise show, put together a snappy vaudeville number, and we toured it from coast to coast. We played the de-luxe houses of the RKO, Paramount, and Warner circuits. We were booked into Loew's State twenty-eight times and, astonishingly, played the famed Palace, the throne room of vaudeville, about eight times.

The act was always the same, gorgeous girls and hilarious



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comics—at various times, Milton Berle, Ritz Brothers, Slate Brothers, and Rio Brothers—and they made me look good. Maybe I wasn't much of an actor, but I was enjoying playing like one. Besides, I was getting paid for it.

One of the most sparkling members of my troupe was a kid I had broken in at the Paradise. I met her first when she was only fourteen, a happy-go-lucky kid brimming over with infectious zest. She came into the Paradise looking for a job. She was accompanied by her mother, so I knew right away she was probably under age.

"What do you do?" I asked.

"I sing," she said, just like that.

New York state law forbade employment of children in theaters or cabarets, so I started her at Loew's State in Newark. New Jersey wasn't so particular about juveniles on stage.

She had her fifteenth birthday during her engagement in Newark and I gave her a party at the Robert Treat Hotel, inviting the entire company. Later I put her in the show at the Paradise and when I left I took her with me on tour. That was the beginning of the fabulous career of Martha Raye.

I have been asked many times to give my formula for stage success. Hundreds of girls got their starts in my shows, so a lot of people think that I ought to know some secret key to stardom. What was my basis of judgment in picking these girls? What was the yardstick? And can anyone simply by self-determination measure up to that standard?

I can't offer any simple key, but looking back over the years and remembering all the girls that worked for me, I'd say that they either had sex appeal or a superabundance of natural inborn skills. Ninety per cent of them had nothing more than exceptional allure of face and figure. The others, like Imogene Coca and Martha Raye, were blessed with great natural ability as clowns or song stylists. Joan Crawford, on

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the other hand, had to learn all the acting she knew by dint of hard work and perseverance. She got her start because she had a beautiful body and great beauty. Barbara Stanwyck had a wonderful sexy speaking voice and a magnificent figure. And Barbara, too, was imbued with the fiery determination to succeed. Acting is something that can be learned, but a good figure or talent is something you have to be born with. Add to either of these the inner desire to succeed and perhaps then you have the key to stardom.

So the entrepreneur or the producer really has very little to do with making anyone a star. I recognized potentials in the girls I hired, gave them an opportunity, and helped all I could, but they took it from there. I never considered myself infallible—and I hired plenty who never rose very far—so the success these girls attained, they got on their own. And that also applies to the actors I knew.

Florenz Ziegfeld died in 1932 and the title "Ziegfeld Follies" was purchased by the Shuberts. It was their intention to continue the lavish productions, and their first edition of the *Follies* was sent out on the road for tryouts. Since I had worked with and for Flo on comedy scenes and in scouting for beauty, I was called in to review the show and make suggestions for improvements. Harry Kaufman, an ex-columnist who had become an aide to Lee and Jake Shubert, asked me to go to Boston and watch the tryout.

This first post-Ziegfeld *Follies* was pretty dismal. Any resemblance to the *Follies* of the old days was purely coincidental, believe me. But midway through the drab production a ventriloquist worked out "in one," in front of the curtain, that is. My first thought was, this is the end. A ventriloquist in the *Follies*. How silly can they get?

But when the performer began putting words into his dummy's mouth, my reaction changed. This was real talent,



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by all odds the one live spot. The program identified the number as Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy.

I turned in my report the next day and about the only plug I could give the show was for this comedy bit. "He'll be a sensation on Broadway," I reported.

"Oh, him," Kaufman said, shrugging. "We're just using him in Boston and Philadelphia because we need something in there while changing scenery. He won't open in New York."

I continued on to Philadelphia with the show and while there I met Bergen and told him what the head office had said. He was brokenhearted. I tried to cheer him up and in the course of our conversation we discovered we had a common bond. We both spoke Swedish and *bunda Svenska*, the low-down country dialect Swedish. And I also discovered what a likable guy he really is.

A couple of years later, when I was on the vaudeville tour, my schedule took me to Chicago. Edgar was playing at the Chez Paree in the Windy City and I dropped in one evening while he was on the floor. He was in the middle of that popular routine in which McCarthy is a patient on an operating table and Bergen is the doctor, while a pretty nurse flutters around. I tried to remain inconspicuous, but the ubiquitous Charlie sat upright and called a gravel-voiced greeting in *bunda Svenska*.

"Hiya, Nils," he went on. "I didn't know you were in town."

Bergen broke in. "What are you doing, breaking up the act by talking to friends like that?" he snapped. "Lie down!"

"I have just seen an old Swedish friend, and I'll talk to him whether you like it or not," the effervescent dummy retorted.

"You lie down, you look sicker than me."

Although the Palace was considered the top of the vaude-



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ville ladder, and I played there with success and pride, I always felt a special loyalty to Loew's State. To me, because of my association with its beginnings, it was Broadway, and whenever I played there I always tried to introduce something new. For one date at Loew's State I auditioned a specialty dancer who came from a little town near Springfield, Massachusetts. She did a very good tap dance, and I hired her at \$350 a week. Her name was Betty Kean.

The thing that made Betty's performance especially good was a certain eccentricity in her dance, touches of humor that made her more than just a tap dancer. She was not especially pretty, although she was blessed with a very good figure. She depended more on dancing ability and a sense of humor. She had no spoken lines, but her odd steps and her mugging were thoroughly enjoyed by the audience.

We played a lot of houses before Betty got around to speaking any lines. But one day, when our comedy seemed to be getting a little stale, I told her to let herself go and ad lib anything that came into her mind. She did, and we kicked it back and forth for several minutes. The result was pandemonium in the audience.

Once Betty got a taste of comedy, it stayed with her, or rather she stayed with it, and she made good. I used her for several weeks and then she got into a Broadway show and in time she was making \$750 a week.

While I was on tour in 1936 I met Ralph Hitz, owner of a string of hotels. Over a dinner in Dayton he told me that his Congress Hotel in Chicago had a beautiful entertainment room but it was losing money. He confessed he took in \$3,000 a week, but lost \$5,000. He wanted to know if I would be interested in trying to put it over. I said I would (I was getting tired of vaudeville and hopping about the country by this time anyway), and I agreed to give it a try. He allowed

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me only \$1,000 for acts, but I went to New York and started forming a company. The chorus and a few features quickly ate up \$850 of my budget.

Then, while the rehearsals were still going on, I got a phone call from Betty Kean. We chatted about her early struggles with me and about her present success. Finally she said, "Granny, I have a little sister, Jane. She's fourteen years old. I heard you were forming a company for the Congress in Chicago and I want you to take her with you. I want you to teach her show business, Granny. Give her some of the things you gave me."

"But, Betty," I protested, "I can't afford it on the budget Hitz gave me. All I have is one-fifty left."

"Good," she said. "We'll take it!"

"We? What do you mean?"

"Jane and me," she explained. "We'll both come for a hundred and fifty."

I was flabbergasted. "You're making at least \$500 a week more where you are. What are you doing this for?"

"I want my kid sister to get the right start in show business," she said. "That's all there is to it."

The \$150 a week hardly paid the expenses for the two girls and their mother in Chicago. But the investment and Betty's sacrifice paid off. Today the Kean Sisters are a night-club attraction as hot as any you'll find from Broadway to Las Vegas to London. "The most socko art in the nitery field today," Radie Harris wrote of them recently in the *Hollywood Reporter*. And Walter Winchell calls them "the greatest." Do you wonder that the word "kean" has an extra-special significance to me?

I'll bet I've been kissed and bussed and hugged and introduced in more night clubs and public places as "the man who made me what I am today" than anyone this side of heaven.



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And if you don't think I eat it up, you ought to watch me when I happen to be around where the Kean Sisters are performing. What a team!

What with all the wandering around I was doing, from big-time vaudeville to successful runs in hotels to vaudeville again, I hadn't seen much of Broadway. By 1938 I was in the chips from my work, but homesick for Broadway. I had always had a yen to open a place all my own, no employers, no percentages, no weekly salary. I went back to New York and started looking around. Pretty soon I found the right spot, a place that had always been a fond memory. It was that little place in the Winter Garden that I slipped through when the police were looking for me after the publicity stunt for *Pleasure Seekers* years ago. I named it the Midnight Sun.

The Midnight Sun was primarily an eating place, with a little entertainment, and it catered to the late diners, show people, and night owls. Frequently the best entertainment in the place was provided by the customers who would come in after their own performances and put on impromptu shows at two or three o'clock in the morning.

One morning about 2 A.M. a zippy blonde number came in and ordered coffee. I had seen her at the Casa Mañana, where she did a straight singing act in front of Vincent Lopez's orchestra. Georgie Raft and a few kindred spirits were in the Midnight Sun this particular morning, and someone asked the blonde to contribute a song. She got up and for about thirty minutes gave an exhibition of singing, dancing, and humor that was real showmanship and a rare delight.

I told her she was wonderful and why wasn't she using this routine at the Casa Mañana? Her face clouded. "I don't get the chance," she said.

I knew Lopez and his policy. He was a swell guy and he beat out some beautiful music, but he wouldn't let this girl



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give out with anything but a sedate song or two. "Mr. Lopez brought me to New York and gave me my chance," she said. "But he won't let me *do* anything."

She was Elizabeth Thornburg of Battle Creek, Michigan, originally, and had done a duet act with her sister Marion. Lopez saw her in Detroit, liked her song styling, and brought her to New York.

Not long after this exhibition of her real talents in the Midnight Sun I got a call from some of my old acquaintances. Some of the boys from the West Side mob turned up and asked if I would M.C. their annual "benefit," which I used to do for them every year. Prohibition had long since ended, but the mob was still in evidence in other operations. Actually, the benefit was a legitimate enterprise to raise money for the poor people of the Tenth Avenue district, Owney Madden's old neighborhood.

I agreed to do the benefit, but I insisted they bring in the blonde from the Casa Mañana. "She'll be the biggest hit you ever had," I promised, "though you may have trouble getting Lopez to release her."

They managed to get her all right. The boys were still pretty powerful persuaders, even in 1938.

When I walked out on stage with her a few nights later and introduced her to the benefit audience, I thought, Boy! What a cold audience! And then it happened.

You know her as Betty Hutton, an unrestrained entertainer today. When she was eighteen, she was truly the blonde bombshell. I have never heard anything to equal the applause that night. The roof went off. About the only comparable reaction I can remember was playing an entertainment at Sing Sing. (If there is an analogy to be seen in the two audiences, let the reader find it.)

Betty Hutton looked then very much as she does today. She

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had the same fire and the same zip and an infinite appeal. Her vocal powers were tremendous. They were as great if not greater than those that characterized the beginnings of Sophie Tucker, Eddie Cantor, and Al Jolson. It was the power old-time performers had to have before there were microphones. Sophie Tucker, I recall, had much more sock those days than she ever exhibits today, simply because she doesn't have to use it now.

Betty Hutton had no need for a microphone then either. She just slammed it over. She sang and did a bit of dancing with her songs and literally jumped all over the place.

Finally she staggered off, fell on my shoulder, and cried, "How'm I doin', Granny?"

"Hold it a minute and listen," I said.

She raised her head. The applause boomed through the place. A big smile broke over her face.

"Gee," she exclaimed, "I guess I was all right, huh?"

"You sure were," I said. "Now go out and do some more."

She skipped out again and went through everything she ever knew and a lot of stuff she had not even rehearsed. She was ready to drop before the audience would let her off.

From that night on Betty was my pal. She'd come over to the Midnight Sun almost every morning and knock herself out. Her exuberant personality had to spend itself somewhere, so she cut loose in my place.

I was still operating the Midnight Sun and a big show at the New York World's Fair in 1939 when Nick Schenck asked me to run a beauty contest. I had done this several times in the past—it was an annual event in Loew theaters in the metropolitan area. Competition began in the neighborhood theaters, and the winners from these were brought together for a big finale to select Miss New York City for the annual Miss America competition in Atlantic City.



### *Some Figures on Some Figures*

The first neighborhood event was held at the Paradise Theatre in the Bronx. One hundred and thirty-eight girls showed up, and one of them really was remarkable in face and figure. It was hardly a contest with her on hand.

The next contest was held at Coney Island, clear across the city, as far south in the municipal geography as the Bronx is to the north. The Bronx winner was so striking, I invited her to enter again in the Coney competition. I just wanted to be sure we had at least one beautiful girl in that event. She told me she lived in Yonkers, up in Westchester County, a long way from Coney. I gave her a dollar for carfare.

"But I can go from Yonkers to Coney Island for a lot less than that on the subway," she protested. "I don't need that much."

That was a switch! A girl turning down money! "Well, keep the change," I said.

She showed up at Coney Island all right, and again she won. The following night, at Loew's Bay Ridge in Brooklyn, she did it again. Furthermore, for the next ten days, in ten different theaters, she captured all the beauty cups in the Loew organization.

She didn't win the top title in Atlantic City, but she had so much class and beauty that I felt she would surely click on the stage. I brought her to George White, who had been one of the judges in the New York contests.

"Look, George," I said. "If I were you, I'd put this doll in your *Scandals*."

White agreed, and I promptly forgot the incident.

One day, quite some time later, I was having lunch in the Brown Derby in Hollywood. A couple of tables away sat one of the most gorgeous ladies I've ever seen in the film capital. Our eyes met after a bit and she blew me a kiss.



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"Well," said my table companion. "Who's that stunning captivator?"

"I don't know," I confessed, "but I'm going to find out. Here she comes."

She came to my table and put out her hand. "You don't remember me, do you, Granny?"

Faces and figures I seldom forget, but this girl had me puzzled.

"I'm surprised at you, Granny," she needled me. "I'm Marie Frye."

It all came back then: the beautiful beauty contest winner, the doll who monopolized the Loew theaters. She was on tour with George White's *Scandals*. They were booked at the Biltmore Hotel in downtown Los Angeles.

I told her about my new night club in Hollywood, and she said she would love to work there. Thus, when the *Scandals* completed its run in Los Angeles, she became the central figure in my show. Eventually M-G-M scouts saw her and signed her and some bright publicity boy dubbed her "The Body." Yes, Marie Frye became Marie McDonald and a sensation in show business.

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### *The Three Most Beautiful*

I have said that the three most femininely beautiful girls I have ever met were Hilda Ferguson, Jean Harlow, and Lucille Ball. The dramatic and pathetic tale of Hilda was recounted earlier in my story. It is time now that I tell you something of the part I played in the lives of the others.

Jean Harlow's background, her early training, and her ultimate success and tragic end are generally known. But there was a crucial period in her life when her chances for stardom hung in the balance and her success (at least in her own mind) seemed doubtful. This is a part of the Jean Harlow story that has never been told, because only two people ever really knew it, Jean and I, and Jean, sweet memory, is gone.

My introduction to Jean began with a phone call from Charlie Moscovitz. I had been away from the Loew office for many years but our relationship had continued warm and friendly and any time I could render a favor they knew they could call on me. Charlie's call came at the weird hour of 10 A.M. Night-club characters are sound asleep at that hour, or should be, so his call woke me up.

"Granny," he said, "Nick Schenck asks if you'd run over to Philadelphia and look at Jean Harlow. He wants you to see if you can do anything for her. She's playing at the Mastbaum Theater there and laying an egg."



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I might have been only half-awake when he started, but when he mentioned Harlow I sat bolt upright. The enchanting platinum blonde had entirely captivated me though I had never met her. Some time before she had appeared in a picture called *Hell's Angels* and the whole world was dazzled. You may remember the picture, how she lured Ben Lyon, her costar, to her apartment on the eve of his departure to war, and how that sequence alone nearly burned up the curtain. On the screen she was the deliberate wanton, using her sex to lure men and taking delight in ruining their lives. It was a role that became her well, for she had all the physical charms necessary and a natural aptitude for sexy display of them. And even though I had never met her, I knew from what I saw of her in pictures that she had everything she needed to become a star.

"Can you help us, Granny?" asked Charlie.

Well, Charlie didn't have to twist my arm. From the way he talked, one would assume he felt he was asking me to do *him* a favor. (But Charlie was always like that, that's why everyone in the organization would break their necks to please him. What a swell guy!)

"Sure, Charlie," I said. "Be glad to. I'll get down to Philly right away." He said Nick would pay me \$600 a week to work with her. I would have worked with Harlow for nothing.

I was not long in discovering what the trouble was. Jean's sexy picture *Hell's Angels* "overstepped the bounds of decency," according to the Hays Office, and she wasn't being given any more jobs in the movies. Some enterprising vaudeville agent had wangled a contract for her at \$3,500 a week for ten weeks, four in Warner Brothers theaters, to be followed by six more in Loew houses. The four weeks were just about up, and the Loew people were to pick up the deal two days hence in their large Metropolitan Theatre in Brooklyn.



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And they, Loew, were desperate, because she had flopped all across country at the Warner houses. This final week in Philadelphia was the most frightful of all.

"Gentlemen," I said to the people at the Loew office, "you've got the wrong impression of that girl. Believe me, she can't miss, if I can make the people see her the way I do."

Doubt hung like a heavy cloud over the whole office and the only glimmer of light was their faith in me. But to me it was no gamble. I trusted my instincts and knowledge of human nature, and, most of all, I recognized true talent when I saw it.

The Mastbaum in Philadelphia was a monster mausoleum, built along the lines of a dirigible hangar. It was a vast, gloomy cavern, and it had been a failure from the day it was built. I sat in the audience during the first show and watched. A chorus of slatternly-looking girls pranced out, dressed as Harlow was supposed to dress, in white evening gowns and wearing overbright blonde wigs. Then out strutted a master of ceremonies, sleek, wavy-haired, oozing confidence that no one, particularly the ladies, could resist his charms. He introduced the platinum star, and his introduction was flippant, coarse, in bad taste. It was filled with innuendo about her sex and her voluptuous figure. I squirmed in my seat.

Harlow came out and I seemed to be the only person in the audience who was even slightly interested. A few were apathetically watching the performance; the rest, obviously, were anxious for them to get off and get on with the show. She got perfunctory applause and went into an act with the flip M.C. And he, slick character, went all out to steal the act by using Jean as his stooge. It ended in a burst of silence.

I went to the manager, introduced myself, and he took me to Jean's dressing room.

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"Shut that door," she commanded in a strained, unnatural voice.

I shut it and stood leaning against the jamb. Suddenly she threw herself on a cot and burst into a fit of hysterical weeping. I didn't know what to do, so I just sat down at her dressing table and did nothing.

The outburst continued for several minutes. Gradually she calmed down, dabbed at her eyes, and between sobs made a half-hearted apology.

"Go right ahead," I said. "When you feel like it, we'll talk."

She turned to me then, and although I was a complete stranger she began to pour out her heart. Obviously, she was badly in need of someone to talk to. Her career was finished, she said. She did not know which way to turn.

"They don't like my parts and no one will give me anything else," she sobbed. "Now this vaudeville thing is even worse. I'm getting so I have to have a drink every time I go on or I simply couldn't face them. In Pittsburgh, I missed several performances because I was too scared to walk on stage. I was sorry for that, because there was a sweet boy there named Dick Powell acting as master of ceremonies. I'm sorry he had to make up excuses for my absence. Now Loew doesn't want me either. What am I to do?"

In all my years with Loew I had never been presented with quite such a problem as this. I had frequently been called on to present stars in person. To open theaters I had brought in stars by the carload. Putting over a recognized name was fairly simple, even though few of them could do anything to provide impromptu entertainment for a show. But putting over a girl like this, completely helpless on stage and demoralized psychologically, well, that was something else.



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Nevertheless, I was still sold on her, and I was certain others must be, too.

I listened through this distraught flow without a word. Finally I said, "Miss Harlow, when you open at Loew's Metropolitan you'll be a hit."

She looked at me and disbelief was written all over her face.

"Who are you? What have you ever done that makes you think I'll be a hit in Brooklyn?"

"Look," I said, "perhaps it's not important who I am, but I've introduced a great many movie stars, and if that is any basis for judgment let me say that none of them had what you've got. There is a ready-made audience waiting to welcome you if the act is presented right." She wasn't convinced but she was listening.

Jean was smaller than most people thought. She was about five feet four and weighed around one hundred and fifteen pounds. She always seemed taller because of her erect carriage and the high heels she wore. On stage or before a camera she could strut like a queen, but in her eyes there was a twinkle that belied all the queenly unapproachable stuff.

She was eager to know what we would do for an act. Vaguely, I outlined some possible routines. "Let's not talk about that," she snapped. "What about the act?"

"That's the act," I said. "Or part of it. Then I'll just ask you some questions and you answer. I'll have a batch of letters in my hand, as if they were fan mail. I'll read them and you answer them. The important thing is for you to be the center of attention."

"When do I get a script?" she asked.

"No script. If you learn lines, you won't be natural. We'll just ad lib the whole thing, because naturalness is what we're



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after." That's it, I thought; if I can only get her to be herself, they'll love her.

But she was panic-stricken. "We can't do that," she cried. "I can't make up words. I have to study them, I have to have a script."

"O.K.," I said, "I'll get you a script." But I never did.

By the next day we had worked out a rough routine and were ready to try it on our own critics. A little censorship might be necessary, I thought, so I called in Major Bowes, the radio M.C. who had an extra-fine theatrical touch, and Louis K. Sidney, who today is an important executive of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. If our act didn't offend them, I knew it would pass anywhere.

We went through the whole act for them and it was all ad lib. And though virtually all of it dealt with sex, it was presented without an objectionable sequence. Our critics did not propose a single cut.

Still Jean was badly frightened. She still insisted she could not go on without prepared lines. "I'd be afraid to go on even with a script," she said.

But Major Bowes and Sidney backed me up. "Memorized lines are likely to make your act stilted," they said.

We opened in Brooklyn the next afternoon. Jean peeked from the wings and saw the house was packed and immediately got stage fright again. "I'll never make it," she sobbed. "I should have learned a script."

In addition to her ordinary and understandable stage fright, I discovered she was suffering from another complex. Jean Harlow, who played the wanton on the screen, was afraid the public hated her for those roles and thought she was the same in real life. Nothing was further from the truth, but she really felt the customers might voice their disapproval of her in actual physical violence.

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I knew a lot depended on the kind of introduction I gave her, so I put everything I had into it that afternoon. I also borrowed an idea from Flo Ziegfeld for her entrance. I had a staircase set up in midstage and as the curtains parted she walked down.

"And she is one of the grandest persons I ever met," I said, winding up my introduction. "Take my word for it"—the audience knew me; I'd played the Metropolitan many times—"she doesn't steal husbands like they make out in the movies. No, and just between us, she is scared to death, because her whole future depends on what you think of her. Here she is, the adorable lady herself, Miss Jean Harlow!"

Jean came down and bowed (not too far; the dress wouldn't permit it), and a wave of applause cascaded across the footlights.

"What'd I tell you?" I said, whispering to her under the noise. "They love you."

Tears started in her eyes and we went into our routine.

Well, Jean Harlow may have been a flop for four weeks, but she made up for it all that afternoon. She really gave a fine performance. Of course it was all Harlow—that was the whole idea—and then for a topper she announced she would play a love scene with me.

"I'm not an actor," I protested to the audience. "But, then, who needs to be with Jean Harlow?" I shrugged.

The scene was pure corn, of course, but with Harlow it was a sensation. The audience ate it up and called for more. She came back for two curtain calls and still the audience howled. Finally she had to make a curtain speech to quiet them.

Nick and Marvin Schenck, on hand for this opener, warmly congratulated her. "We're delighted to have you on our cir-



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cuit, Miss Harlow," they said, and I'm sure they really meant it.

So did I. And I don't recall many thrills in show business that exceeded this one.

Our friendship grew as we went along from theater to theater and I came to know what a really human, warm person she was. She had an animal magnetism (can anyone think of a better term?), but she was as naïve and guileless as a child. She could shoot craps on the floor with the stagehands and musicians (and frequently did), and conduct herself like a princess if the company demanded it. She was never upstage with anyone.

"I was afraid this success you're having might go to your head," I said one day, half-joking.

"Not me, Granny," she declared. "I've been so far down in the dumps and so sure my career was ended that I can't believe this. I'm just hoping it lasts."

Therein lay the tipoff to her most troubling complex. Even at the top of the heap she was uncertain, worried about the future.

"This is fine," she said on another occasion. "But what happens next? I'm not saving a thing, even on \$3,500 a week. I have a lot of people to take care of." She didn't, really. Her mother and her new stepfather and her maid were always around, but she needn't have felt responsibility quite so much. And the fear of public disapproval was always with her, too, even when she was packing them in night after night in every theater we played.

A story is told about her after she became an established star in Hollywood. She attended a party in Hollywood one night where there was some drinking (it was still during Prohibition) and suddenly half-a-dozen policemen broke in.



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"Everybody stay where you are," they commanded. "This is a raid!"

Jean immediately broke into loud wails. "My God, what will happen to us?" she cried. "What are we going to do?"

So fearful was she concerning even the slightest possible danger to her career that she was near hysteria. It was a gag, of course, for this was in the day when everyone in Hollywood played jokes. The incident was gleefully passed over and soon forgotten by everyone but Harlow. Her dread for her career was never far below the surface.

Throughout our tour this terror was always with her, in spite of the fact that each week was a bigger success than the one before. One of the biggest was Loew's State in Newark, naturally, since there was a sort of N.T.G. clique there that always went out of its way to welcome me no matter what kind of show I brought them.

The original six weeks' contract with the Loew chain was extended as Jean continued to click and one day Arthur Willi, who booked the RKO theaters, came to me with a new proposition. (Willi is now Eastern talent scout for RKO Pictures.)

"Five thousand a week for the two of you," he said, "for ten weeks."

"Wonderful, wonderful!" exclaimed Jean, throwing her arms around me. "We'll split it fifty-fifty, Granny."

"Sorry, Jean," I said, "but we are not taking it."

She looked at me with such an expression of disbelief and disappointment that I nearly relented, but I had bigger plans and I told her so. From the day we opened at the Metropolitan in Brooklyn I had been pestering Louis B. Mayer and the other heads at M-G-M to sign her on a film contract. But no one would give her a tumble. They had a picture scheduled called *Red-Headed Woman* which, I figured, was made

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to order for Jean. I decided, in desperation, to work a little shenanigan on them. So every night for a curtain speech I'd lead Jean to the footlights and tell the audience about the M-G-M picture and then ask them if they didn't think Jean Harlow was a natural for the part. "Wouldn't you folks like to see her back on the screen?" I'd say, and the applause indicated I was on the right track. As a result of this not-so-subtle campaign the Metro offices were flooded with letters from fans begging them to give her the part.

I was sure Metro would eventually come around and that was why I asked her to hold off on Arthur Willi's offer. I didn't want her tied up on a \$5,000-a-week vaudeville deal when she had a chance of earning that much a day in pictures.

"You're a funny guy, Granny," she said. "We're going over big and you turn down \$2,500 a week just to try to get me to Hollywood. Where do you figure?"

"I couldn't dream up anything I'd rather do than work with you and get that salary for doing it," I said. "I'd call that theatrical heaven, but the movies offer two things you'd never get in a lifetime of vaudeville: security and stardom. I'd feel like a louse if I steered you into a four-a-day vaudeville when you have a chance with Metro."

Our tour rolled on to Cleveland with still no encouragement from Hollywood. There was some talk around the Loew office that ours was just another N.T.G. show and the friends I had along the road made it successful. I knew better than that. I knew whose show it was and it wasn't mine, although I did have a wonderful following in the houses around New York. Cleveland, I knew, would be different. I wasn't known out there, and I was confident Harlow would be just as big a success there as she was everywhere else.

We had several things in our favor in Cleveland but still it was Jean Harlow's show. Loew's in Cleveland has about the



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largest lobby in the world and the day we opened there both the theater and the lobby were jammed. They stayed that way all week.

One of the things that helped was Jack Dempsey. I knew Jack and I heard he was in town so I phoned him. "Come over and give the little girl a hand," I said. And Jack, always willing to help out, came over and met us in Jean's dressing room. That was a meeting for the books! The queen of sex, fascinating and enticing, and the vital and dynamic Dempsey. Beauty and the beast!

When I presented them on stage she snuggled up to him, stared up at him with those come-hither Harlow eyes, and the audience swooned. Her arms crept around his shoulders and then she pulled his head down and kissed him.

"Fall down and take the count," I whispered.

Jack took the buss and fell flat on his back. Jean stood over him and I counted, very slowly, up to fourteen. This was not so long after Jack's bout with Gene Tunney that the audience had forgotten the "long count." The roar they made shook the rafters. It was some opening, believe me.

The stage show that week consisted of only two acts, Jean and the Hollywood Collegians, a sort of crazy band. Everyone in it was sort of zany, everyone, that is, except the saxophone player who seemed a little more serious than the rest. After I got to know the boys I learned this one was named Fred MacMurray. And we had another visitor during the week.

Generally Jean, her family, and I had our meals together on this tour and Jean seldom ever stepped out. But one day while we were in Cleveland she said, "I hope you don't mind if I have dinner this evening with someone special."

I grinned. I never was quite sure whether she thought of me as a big brother, manager, father, or partner. "Who is it?"



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She said it was the young M.C. who was so nice to her at Warners' Stanley Theatre in Pittsburgh.

Dick Powell hasn't changed much since the day Jean Harlow introduced him to me backstage at the Loew theater in Cleveland.

In all our weeks together, Jean and I had only one argument. It happened in Cleveland. I was unavoidably detained one afternoon and missed a show. I came in just in time to see her wind up the act all by herself. She was ad-libbing and doing a good job. What a wonderful thing it was to see her out there by herself, after the way I first saw her in Philadelphia.

But when she came off I caught the devil. She let me have it with everything, and Harlow's everything, I discovered, was something to behold. I'm sure the audience heard her to the last row in the balcony. All I could do was stand in awe and admiration. "Who do you think you are, anyhow, leaving me standing out there all alone?" But after several minutes of this I decided I'd had enough and walked out.

Presently, through the thin wall separating our dressing rooms, I heard her sobbing. I went in and put my hand on her shoulder. She cried a little more and then admitted she was sorry, that it was just because she was so upset.

"I didn't know what to do out there by myself," she sobbed. "All I could remember was those terrible days before, when I was flopping so bad."

"You were wonderful," I said. "I'm never going to worry about you again. You've got what it takes."

And I was able to prove that fact to M-G-M before our tour ended.

I went to Hepner, the wigmaker, and bought a red wig and put it on her and made a screen test. She was just as stunning in the wig as she was with her platinum trade-mark.

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I sent the test off to Metro and finally the long-awaited word came. Jean was signed. On closing night (we were back in New York then) so many people never cried so much. Jean started it. It spread to her mother and stepfather and to Blanche, her maid, and even I got into the act. Then the stagehands, who were always Jean's pals, commenced, and it spread to the ushers and the musicians. Somehow it got started in the audience and the boys in the orchestra pit were nearly flooded out.

Well, briefly, that was the role I played in the life of beautiful, tragic Jean Harlow, one of the three most femininely beautiful women I ever met.

Lucille Ball, as I said, was the third.

I met Lucille in Baltimore. I was playing the Hippodrome there during one of my vaudeville tours when an old friend of mine named Keenan Wynn came backstage to visit. You know Keenan as a movie celebrity, but at that particular time he was slightly in the dumps. He was playing in a legitimate show at the Kirnan Theatre, he said, and the show was a turkey. "It's closing tonight," he sadly announced.

I've always had a morbid interest in turkeys. To a showman it is just as important and educational to know why a show lays an egg as it is to know what makes a hit. So between shows I reciprocated Keenan's call to get a look at this turkey. As I stood in the wings, out walked a girl so beautiful and fascinating that I was struck a blow from which I've never recovered. I couldn't tell you what the show was about or why it folded. About all I can remember is that beautiful, breathtaking girl. As far as I was concerned, no one since Harlow equaled her in sex appeal and feminine grace. Yes, that was Lucille Ball and, for my money, success, years, marriage, children, nothing has changed her.



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And that was Lucille's first show, and a flop. She had only a very small part in it, but there was no denying the fact that she was by far the most beautiful thing I'd seen in a long time.

Wynn introduced us. I wanted to talk to her, to tell her that she was the greatest find since Harlow. We had dinner together and I missed my opening that night, but I told her, "We may never meet again," I said, "but I want you to know that you're the greatest thing since Jean Harlow. Your future success is just as certain as tomorrow's sunrise."

"I wish I thought that," she said, trying to hide the disappointment and doubt in her voice. "I'm going back to New York and try to get a job as a model again."

As a model I knew she would do well to make a hundred a week. I told her I paid my girls that just for walking out on the stage. She listened, and she promised to come to see me at the Paradise, which I was operating at the time, if she did not get work right away.

She must have found employment because I didn't see her again, at least not for five years.

Soon after I came to Hollywood in 1940 I heard that she had a contract with RKO, and one day I ran into her on the RKO lot.

"Well," I said, "so you made it, just as I said you would."

"Yes, I'm in Hollywood," she sighed. "But have you seen the things I'm working in?"

I had seen a couple of them and they were pretty terrible. Furthermore, I thought the things they gave her to do were not helping her career. I could understand her bitterness. She would never be a star if she kept getting pictures like those.

A few days later I met Al Lichtman, an old friend in the Loew organization and a vice-president at M-G-M (Al and Spyros Skouras put over CinemaScope). Right away he de-



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cided I ought to have a welcome-to-California party and he arranged a luncheon for me out at the Culver City studio. There were about twenty Metro executives around the table and it was just like old-home week. There were Eddie Mannix, another Loew alumnus, Harry Rapf, who had put over Joan Crawford, at my insistence, and many other old friends.

"Well, Granny," said Mannix, grinning, "have you got any more lovelies up your sleeve, any more discoveries like Crawford or Harlow?"

"Yeah," someone else chimed in, "we could use another Jean Harlow around here."

"You fellows leave yourselves wide open for me, don't you?" I said, ribbing them. "But the fact is, I do have another Harlow up my sleeve, only better. Any of you guys ever hear of Lucille Ball?"

While they listened with half an ear I told them about her, what lousy breaks she was getting at RKO and what a natural I was sure she would be if given half a chance.

Mannix, chuckling, turned to Rapf. "Harry, you're the guy who took Crawford when Granny pushed her, take a look at this Ball. If there's anything to her, get her."

A week or so later I got a call from Harry Rapf. "Thought you'd like to know," he said, "we've just signed Lucille Ball."

One of the first pictures Metro put her in was a musical and the coincidence worth mentioning in this connection is the fact that Keenan Wynn was also in it. It was a long jump from the turkey in Baltimore.

It was shortly after this that Lucille married Desi Arnaz. I knew Desi, had become acquainted with him when he made his debut in New York. At that time he could speak very little English and he was working in a Cuban cabaret on the site of Will Oakland's old Terrace. Desi was singing Latin-

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American songs and shaking his maracas and all the women in New York were nuts about him.

But I had lost track of Desi and didn't meet him again until one night when he came to my place in Hollywood. He was in uniform (a sergeant) and he said he was in charge of entertainment at an army hospital nearby. He wanted me to do a show for him. I made an appointment to meet him and go over the details at my house that evening.

I was late getting there so I phoned my Swedish cook, an excellent cook, by the way, but not too bright otherwise. I told her I was expecting an important person and to please make him comfortable until I arrived. I phoned again at the hour I had told Desi to be there and asked her if that important person had arrived yet.

"No, sir, Mr. Granlund," she said. "There's nobody here but a soldier and a little girl."

A soldier and a little girl? Now, I asked myself, who could that be? When I arrived I found Lucille and Desi in the living room. I guffawed.

"What are you laughing at?" Desi demanded.

I told him about the soldier and the little girl.

Lucille laughed, as only Lucille can when she is highly amused. "Hear that, Desi?" she beamed triumphantly. "A married woman and she thought I was just a little girl."

And Desi? Well, there's a little story about Desi that illustrates what I know about the guy.

Along with my cabaret activities, television, and movie commitments (I made five pictures), I played a six weeks' run at the Lido Cabaret in San Francisco. This was in 1948 and Desi Arnaz, out of the army then, was leading a band at the Palace Hotel. He finished around 1 A.M. each night and since Lucille was working on a picture in Hollywood, Desi would



### *The Three Most Beautiful*

drop around at my place almost every night just to pass the time.

One night, as we were leaving the place, a girl standing by the cloakroom began to wail. She had come in with some man, she explained, and on leaving the place her escort had said, "Let me have your check and I'll get your coat." He had gotten the coat, all right, but then he had run out with it.

"Which way did he go?" demanded Desi.

"That way," she said, pointing to the door.

Desi dashed out and I followed. We got a glimpse of someone running nearly a block away and Desi took out after him. I am long-legged and, in my day, I could keep up with the best of them, but Desi sprinted away and outdistanced me. He came back in a moment, slightly disheveled and out of breath, but with a fur coat over one arm and a beaten-up character clutched in the other.

"That's the man!" the girl cried. "And that's my coat!"

"I saw this bum running," gasped Desi, "and I saw him throw the coat away. But I decided he needed a lesson anyway so I roughed him up a little." Roughed him up a little? Lord, he nearly killed the guy!

It took the police, who arrived soon after, to save the thief from further injury because Desi was all for working him over again.

And the girl, tearfully grateful, never learned the identity of her benefactor. If she reads this now she may boast that she knows what people mean when they speak of true chivalry. It may be a thing of the past, a virtue found only in fairy tales and Mother Goose rhymes, but there is still a little of it around. And I am inclined to think it is most commonly found among Latin-American gentlemen.

Desi came into my place in Hollywood one night and he was lit. I think it was one of the few times in the guy's life



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that he drank enough to make him like that, but he was crying something about trouble with Lucille. It was shortly after they were married. I heard the words "split up" and "divorce" and similar talk for a while but it didn't worry me much. I knew the basic characters of both these kids and I knew they were capable of working out their differences and settling their own problems. And they did, and I can point to their happy union as one of the best examples of adult reasoning I've ever seen.

And all that I prophesied about Lucille has come to pass. It's a wonderful thing for a man to have known even one such lovely person. Fortunate indeed, I think, is the man who has known three. Hilda and Jean and Lucille were all different, and yet they were the three most beautiful women I've ever known.

# 21

## *Nostalgia and What Lola Wants*

There was no indication a hundred years ago that the name of a meandering little street that began at the Battery and lost itself in a pasture a couple of miles farther north would one day become a synonym for entertainment the world over. So it is not very likely that Horace Greeley was thinking about show business when he handed out his pronunciamiento a century ago. I even doubt if very many of those who took his advice to go West ever heard of Horace. Considering the Hollywood hegira alone, I'm sure of it, for few if any ever read that much of history. Some, let's face it, couldn't even read.

And the migration continues. Sooner or later all show people head West. The hopeful young things, the luscious beauty seeking the gold and glory of cinema success, the ambitious Adonis, the writer, the press agent, and the countless fringe characters that follow them, are drawn to this one small Mecca called Hollywood. In recent years it has had a suburb called Las Vegas that has siphoned off some of the pressure, but the West, as a magnet, still draws them.

Even I, to whom Broadway was mother-father-fireside, finally succumbed to the current. I was on a tour in 1940 that brought me to the Coast. Ever sensitive to trends and public demands, I soon got the idea that this big, booming,



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boisterous baby called Hollywood might be ready to welcome a night club of the Broadway type. My attention was attracted by a spot a step away from Hollywood and Vine.

Now that intersection, as everyone knows, is one of those geographic points that need no further identification. There is in every town of any consequence some such point that is synonymous with the name of the city itself. Times Square is New York; Piccadilly is London; the Champs Élysées is more Paris than Paris; the Ginza is Tokyo; and Hollywood and Vine pinpoints the hub of the film capital.

It was a shock to learn that the Florentine Gardens, a little stone's throw from so renowned an address, was being passed up by customers as if it were the Four Corners in Henry County, Iowa. The owner of the Florentine at this time was Frank Bruni, and the joint was flooded with red ink. He propositioned me to bring a show into the place and try to put it on its feet. It was a challenge, the kind I have never been able to resist. It was like the Parody and the Silver Slipper, the Congress Hotel in Chicago, and even the Hollywood Restaurant in the early days, when no one believed in our new concept of nighttime entertainment.

But I wasn't burning any bridges between me and my beloved Broadway. I agreed to go into the Florentine Gardens for six weeks, just to see what could be done. The six weeks stretched to six months to five years before I finally left. And in that time it made a \$1,000,000 net profit!

The Florentine had never enjoyed a very high reputation. One reason, which seemed obvious to me, was the fact that the management would never pay salaries that would attract high-class entertainment. Chorus girls were paid \$30 a week, which was a shock to me after paying \$100 a week as a matter of course. I always figured you get about what you pay for in this world, and if you paid cheap wages you got cheap en-



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tainment. And the only kind of customers you can get with cheap entertainment is cheap customers. And you can't make money on cheap customers.

So the first change I made in the Florentine was to upgrade the salary schedule. The net result of this was to get me a line-up of the prettiest and shapeliest dolls ever gathered together in one spot in the land of sunshine and cinema shadow. Then, as feature attractions, I brought in such headliners as Sophie Tucker, Harry Richman, Ozzie Nelson, and Paul Whiteman.

There had never been a Negro entertainer in the Florentine so I engaged the Mills Brothers again. They had long since passed their peak of popularity, one of the brothers had died, and the father was filling in. But I figured they still had some of the old magic and I put them in the cabaret lounge, off the main dining room. I had no feeling of discrimination in doing this. I simply felt it would be better business to prove their popularity with a small group before trying them on the main floor which seated 600 people. I need have had no worry. Business boomed in the little lounge and within the week I moved them into the main dining room.

What a wonderful bunch they were. The three boys and their fine old "Pops" played the Florentine nine solid months at one time, went away for a short while, then came back. Altogether, they appeared at the Florentine for three years. I like to think that this long, successful run helped bring them back to the peak again.

But it was the chorus that was the backbone (don't worry, I know my anatomy) of the entertainment at the Florentine Gardens. And what a chorus it was! At one time my show included Yvonne De Carlo, Marie (The Body) McDonald, Jean Wallace, Gwen Verdon, and Lili St. Cyr. All are big

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names today, but in 1940 they were just kids struggling to make rent and groceries.

The first to rise from that fabulous line was Yvonne De Carlo. I remember how she looked the first time I saw her. Dave Gould, my choreographer, came in one afternoon after rehearsal to tell me about a new girl who had applied for work. (Dave is the genius who created memorable dances for Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire—remember their “Carioca” and “Continental”?) He was excited. “Granny,” he said, “she’s terrific.”

She and her mother came in again later and I interviewed her. She was born in Vancouver, she said, and she and her mother had come to Hollywood seeking work. She had worked in a few places, but, obviously, they had not done well. At the time they were living in one small room.

Yvonne had a doll-like face, with childish full lips and glistening brunette tresses. Her dancing was not spectacular, but her presentation was so charming that she won the hearts of all who saw her. I discovered that much the first night she was on. I took her by the hand and led her out onto the floor.

“Here is a little girl who would like to be in our show,” I announced. “I really don’t know whether she dances or stands on her head. I’ll leave it to you to decide whether she is in our show or not.”

Turning to Yvonne, I said, “All right, honey, go ahead and show us.”

She did a timid tap routine. It wasn’t perfect, but her charm won the audience, just as the same approach had captivated the crowd when Alice Faye broke into the Hollywood Gardens.

“Well, is she in or out?” I asked. There was a loud howl



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of approval. "O.K., little girl," I said, turning to her, "you've got a job."

From the very beginning Yvonne De Carlo had that indefinable something that marks the trouper. I never saw anyone more ambitious or more constant in her application to work. She was the kind of youngster who never seemed to tire. Her avid search for knowledge was a kind of perpetual hunger. When Paul Whiteman and his orchestra came to the Florentine, she listened raptly to the music of the great maestro as he rehearsed. "I would give anything in the world if I could dance to that music," she whispered wistfully.

"Don't look now, Yvonne," I said, grinning. "But that's what I am planning for you." I saw to it that she had dancing lessons and Gould put her through some stiff rehearsals with Whiteman. The result was a sensation on opening night.

Yvonne had been working for me for several months when she came in one day in tears. She disclosed then, for the first time, that she was in the United States on a visitor's visa and her time was up. She would have to go back to Canada. It was as much of a blow to me as it was to her, for I had become quite fond of the child by this time. Nevertheless, the government ordered her to return to Vancouver, to await re-entry under a worker's permit.

From Canada Yvonne wrote long letters, telling how terrible she felt being kept from the job she loved. But after unwinding a little red tape and conforming to the regulations, I arranged a two-year contract for her that enabled her to come back to the Florentine. Before the two years were up, she applied for citizenship. We staged a series of numbers that set off her particular talents and no one I've ever employed did more to bring in the business. And let me repeat, the girl worked all the time. She studied four or five hours every day, singing, dancing, Oriental rhythms. We were



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doubling in the Orpheum Theatre in Los Angeles, and Yvonne was doing a toe dance four times a day.

One day one of the other girls called me frantically. "Better look at Yvonne," she said. "Her toes are bleeding."

I called her. "Yvonne," I said, "let me see your feet."

"They're all right," she said, and tried to brush me off.

I had really to lay down the law to her to make her stop. Her toes were raw and bleeding, but she wanted to go on with her number.

Yvonne De Carlo has tremendous sex appeal, first and foremost, but it is her ambition, her inner drive, that has put her across. How many girls I know in Hollywood, how many I've known on Broadway, might be stars today had they had Yvonne's perseverance.

Eventually Yvonne got a movie contract with Paramount, but Dorothy Lamour was on the same lot at that time and Yvonne didn't have a chance. She was dropped after a year, but she waited and studied some more.

Then producer Walter Wanger needed a girl who could ride a horse, was a toe ballerina, and could do an Oriental dance. Yvonne could do all of them. I had taught her horsemanship myself.

She clicked in this Wanger picture for Universal, starred in her first film appearance. Yes, the lavish musical, *Salome, Where She Danced*, was made to order for Yvonne De Carlo, because she had prepared herself for everything she did in it.

Any parent would be proud to have a daughter like Yvonne. Her serious application to the problems of living would gladden the heart of any parent.

I had other "children" like Yvonne in the Florentine and that is why, by 1942, it was being called the "million-dollar show." We had at least that much value in our talent, as that talent later proved, and business was booming. I had proved

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to the owners that high salaries got high-class entertainment got high income.

I had discovered so much good talent in California that we were fairly flooded with it. And again remembering how I had doubled in show business in New York, I decided that the same trick could be worked out here. I was booked into the Paramount Theatre in Los Angeles by Mike De Marco, a really great showman. Yvonne De Carlo, still a neophyte in show business, was in the show, of course. I opened with her and did the same routine I had used with Alice Faye so many years before.

One day two tall, gorgeous, willowy girls, a blonde and a brunette, came to see me in my dressing room at the Paramount. They looked eighteen or nineteen, but I learned later that they were only fourteen and sixteen. Their father, they said, ran a private detective agency in Eagle Rock, a suburb of Los Angeles, and they wanted to get into show business. The family name was Blackadder. I told them to report to Dave Gould at the Florentine.

I wanted to change the name of the blonde, so I named her after two socialite friends of mine, Barbara Hutton and Adelaide Moffett. She became Barbara Moffett.

They were rehearsing one afternoon a few days later, while I sat with their mother and watched. The girls were good and I told Mrs. Blackadder I thought they had great promise.

"I'm so glad you think so, Mr. Granlund," she said, "for I have still another daughter." She opened an envelope and handed me a stack of photographs. "She is a half-sister of these girls."

The pictures showed a long-haired blonde with a sparkling smile and a lovely figure. The pictures showed her almost in the nude, so I had no doubt of her excellent proportions. I thought she was about as perfect as anything I had ever seen.



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Her name, Mrs. Blackadder said, was Marie Van Schacht. I made a mental note that if I hired her we'd change the name.

She was hired and we made up a name for her which was inspired by a gray-haired wealthy socialite who threw enough champagne parties at the Florentine to keep us in business.

That is how Lili St. Cyr, the renowned exotic dancer who now commands a \$2,500 weekly salary, entered the Florentine.

To Lili, even then, clothes were unimportant. The fact is, she had an aversion to wearing anything while she was performing. In one number she depicted a Chinese queen and was borne across the floor on a platform carried by the other girls. It was legal for a girl to appear in the nude, provided she did not move. Lili remained perfectly still, carrying a bunch of peach blossoms in her lap. One night one of the girls stumbled and the platform wobbled. Lili lost her balance, but not her aplomb. She stepped gracefully off the platform and walked offstage wearing nothing but the peach blossoms.

The other Blackadder girls did all right, too. Barbara Moffett became a starlet at RKO, put in an overseas stint with U.S.O., and married millionaire toymaker Louis Marx. They have four children, all boys, and all with famous generals for godfathers, among them General Dwight D. Eisenhower. Lou Marx was the man on a *Time* magazine cover last December. Dorothy, or "Dardy," the other sister, married my good friend and the good showman, Harold Minsky.

And there was another pert youngster who worked for me who herself became a *Time* cover, and no one among all my hard-working girls deserved it more.

Gwen Verdon's tumble of fine-spun, natural-red hair rode her head like a wild sunset the day she came in to see me about a job. Her birdlike face and pert pointed nose were



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less American than they were those of a Continental sou-brette. Her wide red mouth was constantly parted in bubbling mirth, while her green eyes, speckled with yellow, hid the ever-present suggestion of a tear behind heavily mascaraed lashes. *Time* said, "Her hands and feet are overlarge for her trim 5 ft. 4½-in. frame, but their effect is to lend emphasis to the movement of a well-disciplined body which, on the stage, seems always to be making slyly witty comments of its own."

I was struck with the memory of The Golden Girl, who was so spectacular at the Paradise back in 1933. I had never forgotten her perfect figure, the first requisite for such an act, and was always on the lookout for another like her. In Gwen Verdon I was sure I had it. I asked her if she would do a replica of the girl in golden paint. She would, she said.

For nearly a year then she was the sensation of Hollywood. I'm sure the original Goldie of a decade before would have found nothing to criticize in this new edition.

Suddenly she dropped out of the show and I heard she was married. She had a series of ups and downs after that, and mostly downs, as *Time* magazine later recounted. But she was a real trouper, born to the colors, and when she came back she came with a bang. As *Time* said:

Gwen was never stage struck. The theater was too much an integral part of her. Her great-grandfather was an actor in Shakespearean repertory touring the British provinces. Her grandfather was an English "step dancer," her English-born mother a ballerina, vaudevillian, and dancing teacher. Her father, Joseph Verdon, is a stage electrician on the M-G-M lot in California's Culver City, where Gwyneth Evelyn Verdon was born 30 years ago.

Before she was three years old, a series of infantile dis-

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eases had left Gwen so rachitic and knock-kneed that she could barely walk. But circumstances that might have prevented another child from even dreaming of a stage career served, in Gwen's case, only to hurry it up. Vigorously rejecting a doctor's suggestion that her daughter's legs be broken and reset in the hope of straightening them, Gwen's mother tried instead the one course of therapy that she herself knew best—dancing. Laced into ugly, knee-high corrective boots during her off hours, Gwen Verdon, at three, was enrolled in her mother's dancing class to learn ballet, buck-and-wing, soft-shoe, and the waltz clog. At four, she was already proficient enough to appear with her mother in an act at the Los Angeles Biltmore; at six (billed as "the fastest tapper in the world"), she was dancing at Loew's State and the Million-Dollar Theatre.

Working and studying constantly at her trade, always trapped in a modified form of the corrective boots in her off hours, she got what regular schooling she could. By the time she was fifteen she was a seasoned veteran, with experience in a wide variety of show-business jobs. She was only sixteen when she came to work for me at the Florentine Gardens, and only a year older when she married.

Her husband, brash, fun-loving Jim Henaghan, sometime screen writer, gossip columnist, literary agent (for Mickey Spillane), promoter, and general man about Hollywood, was twice her age. It was a marriage doomed from the start. Gwen did her best to keep pace with her fast-moving husband, but in time she had to admit defeat. She got a job with dance director Jack Cole and as his assistant did a dazzling series of dance numbers before the cameras at Twentieth Century-Fox. Unfortunately, she was never really seen in these pic-



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tures. She always had to step aside and let some star take the bows when the cameras rolled in for a close-up. One of her jobs was to teach Jane Russell how to seem more sexy and Marilyn Monroe less so.

I saw her often after she gave up marriage and turned back to the only profession she knew. I met her and her mother one day in Las Vegas, while she was working with Jack Cole's dancers. "Granny," she said, "I'm going to Broadway; do you think I'm crazy?"

"I might advise anyone else against it," I said, "but not you, Gwen. You've got what it takes. You'll make out all right." And she did.

"What Lola Wants, Lola Gets," is only one number in a great show (*Damn Yankees*), starring Gwen Verdon, which made theatrical history in 1955. But I have a hunch that it has become the theme song for Gwen "Lola" Verdon.

As the Florentine settled firmly into the Hollywood landscape, I seemed to settle with it. I planned to stay only long enough to put it over, six weeks, or six months at the most. But six years rolled by before I knew it. One day I got to feeling a little more nostalgic than usual for the sights and sounds of Broadway and I decided to go back.

I opened a club in the Greenwich Village section and had a big opening night. But that was a big mistake. Opening night was both a thrill and a heartbreak. I should never have done it. There is a time in a man's life beyond which he should never attempt to revive the past.

Opening night two of my oldest friends, Broadway pals of thirty-five years or more, were on hand. Damon Runyon left his hospital bed, where he was being treated for an advanced stage of cancer of the throat. Accompanied by his closest friend, Walter Winchell, he invaded the downtown night life to be present at my opening. Damon's voice was gone, and he



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had to communicate solely by writing, scribbling notes on a small pad he carried. From his ringside table he sent a note backstage.

"Great show, welcome back," he wrote.

And Walter. Seemed like the only thing I could recall that night about our own long friendship was the night his daughter was in an oxygen tent and I sat with him in Lindy's until seven o'clock in the morning, when he could go back to the hospital again.

It was Damon's last night out on the Broadway he loved so well.

Broadway itself had changed so much I hardly knew it. Perhaps I was blinded by nostalgia, but I had the feeling that the change was not for the better. The glittering, scintillating Era of Wonderful Nonsense had long since passed. The hot-dog stands and honky-tonk holes in the walls around Times Square were a poor exchange for the Broadway I knew. I could have fought through and made a success in the Village, for I still knew all the ropes in this business, but my heart wasn't in it. I got back to California as quickly as I could. There, in a sunny clime where things grew fast, I could find a whole new world to conquer, new shows to do, and new techniques to do them in. Like TV, for instance.

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### *Bless Them for the Memory*

My advice to any man past fifty who thinks he has seen his best days is to find a new outlet for the talents he has used and the skills he has learned in his first half century. It's the constant grind in the same old rut that makes a man old instead of merely middle-aged. Pluck him out of the hole and set him down in a new pasture, with all he has learned in the old, and you wouldn't know him.

TV, I found, was more suited to my talents than either radio or cabaret shows. Actually, it gave me an opportunity to combine and to use in one operation everything I knew in show business. Sound was the only thing I could deliver over radio. Sight and sound were sold in cabaret shows and vaudeville, but the audiences were limited. TV had no such limitations. And as a field for discovering new talent, a hunting ground for kids who deserved a boost, well, it was unbeatable.

There was, for instance, that shapely little blonde named Shelley Winters, whom I found wandering around town like a lost sheep. And that amazing figure that turned up at my broadcasting studio in a Bikini bathing suit, only to be told, "For gosh sakes, Joan Olander, put something on before the police catch us." She did, and she became one of the best M.C.'s on KTLA. Joan also wowed 'em at military camps as



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a real live pin-up. With talent like that around any old ham, even I, could get by with the most critical audience.

Still keeping up with my night-club show business, I moved into the Flamingo in Las Vegas, in 1949, and the first girl I picked for the show was a golden blonde named Sheree North. This was not the Sheree later touched by gold and glamour, the smash hit on television, the sensational dancing star of the silver screen. No, she was nineteen then and so beaten and buffeted by the world that I wondered that she had the guts to keep going. She had been a bride at sixteen, a mother at seventeen, and divorced before she was nineteen. She would work at anything, and every opportunity I could wangle for her on television she always jumped at.

I had done a few shows in Las Vegas, one for Wilbur Clark in 1943, soon after he acquired the lease on the El Rancho Vegas Hotel. He was so pleased that he wrote me later, "As the result of your show and the interest generated in the entertainment you presented, I've been able to put the El Rancho over to a big success."

One thing leads to another, and the reputation I got in that engagement led to an offer from Moey Sedway, a pal of Charlie Sherman back in the days of the Paradise on Broadway.

But Moey had a partner I didn't like. Moey had an interest in the Flamingo in Las Vegas, and at that time it was the top spot in this wide-open desert resort. I wanted to put a show in the Flamingo, but the fly in the soup was Bugsy Siegel, Moey's partner. Bugsy was one thug I had always shied away from. He was the mad trigger-happy type whom I had avoided in the past and whom I had no desire to become associated with at this late date. But a few months later Siegel was blasted off the list as he lolled in the plush love nest he maintained for his moll, Virginia Hill, in Beverly Hills. And when



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Moey called me a few days later and repeated his offer, I accepted.

So it was in 1949 that I moved into the Flamingo and the first girl I picked was Sheree North. I never saw anyone so delighted to get a job, and when I told her she was to receive \$100 a week plus an extra \$50 for doing a specialty, she nearly swooned. This, she said, would enable her to take care of her mother and her baby the way they deserved.

But Sheree was hard luck prone. She drove to Vegas from Hollywood and as she was taking her bags from the car, the trunk compartment top fell and injured her back. She managed to open with the show, but she was unable to continue, and two weeks before Christmas she was taken to a hospital.

I rushed up a replacement and then went over to see her in the hospital. I never saw such a broken, desperate girl. The world, for her, had ended. She wept bitterly.

Sheree had had burdens and responsibilities hanging over her ever since she could remember. She had taken any job that came along because she and those she was responsible for had to eat. The cheesecake and calendar art, the "home movies" with such fetching titles as *Sheree and Her Can-Can* and *Sheree and Her Cat Dance*, and a widely publicized photograph that postal authorities claimed was indecent (though a judge ruled it wasn't), all these she did because her family had to eat. A lot of girls in Hollywood do these things simply to pay the rent.

I stood in the doorway of the hospital room looking at her. Finally I walked around the bed and sat on the edge of it. "Hello, Granny," she mumbled, through sobs that racked her from head to foot.

"Hi, kid," I said. "Feeling sorry for yourself again?" I figured the best thing I could do for her was to get her to thinking about something else. "You think you've hit bot-

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tom, eh? Well, that's fine, because you can't go any farther than bottom. The only way you can go now is up." She had turned off the faucet, so I continued. "I think it's time now to count your assets. Let's see, you're young, you're beautiful, you have a terrific natural ability, you're a born dancer, and"—taking a little credit for myself—"with a little help from me you've learned to talk. What's more, everyone loves you. So what have you got to worry about?"

The tears and the sobs had all but disappeared by the time I finished. "Someday," I concluded, "you will look back on this experience as just a temporary interruption on your way to success."

I continued her salary and the Flamingo and my friend Abe Schuller took care of her hospital bill and a few weeks later she was back in the show. She became acquainted with Chris Carter, an El Monte High School girl, and because the two were exceptional dancers, I teamed them up in some numbers.

After the Flamingo run ended, she went back to chorus work. Sheree and her partner eventually landed jobs at Paramount Studios, where Sheree did a number with Jerry Lewis in the Martin and Lewis picture, *Money from Home*. Then one day she bounded in with real news. "Oh, Granny," she laughed, "we're going to New York." She and Chris had an offer to appear in *Hazel Flagg* on Broadway.

Things scored quickly after that. She was well received on Broadway and her television dance with Bing Crosby and Jack Benny was a sensation. It was so hot that Bing felt called upon to comment over the microphone as it finished.

"Well," he remarked, "I hope we all get a good seat in the wagon."

Marilyn Monroe ran into contract trouble with Twentieth



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Century-Fox and Sheree was named to move in at \$1,750 a week in the picture *How to Be Very, Very Popular*.

I was visiting in New York for a few days while she was still on Broadway, and one night I was in the Copacabana with Walter Winchell and some friends.

"Did you catch Sheree North?" I inquired, making my usual conversational pitch. "She's one of my discoveries."

"Yeah, aren't they all?" someone remarked, stifling a pseudo yawn.

I couldn't have planned it better. A moment later Sheree herself came in, spotted me at the table, and came fluttering over to me. "This is the guy," she said, kissing me, "who gave me my first break."

Kids with stars in their eyes swarm into Hollywood from all over the world. By plane and train and bus and bicycle they flock to the motion-picture Mecca. Each comes armed with confidence that he or she is marked for stardom. Unfortunately, many of them are armed only with self-confidence and the marks they get are frequently black ones. But all of them, regardless of their armor, need help. Finding new talent and helping to mold it into the shape of a star is to me still the most fascinating pursuit in show business—or any other.

The years which I have attained, the record of discoveries credited to me, and the hit shows I have produced entitle me to the fatherly role I play in show business today. In this routine I'm frequently called on for advice, and I give it freely. And sometimes I hand it out when it isn't called for. But whether it is accepted or rejected, I can always understand, for I have a vivid memory of my own cocksure youth. Rejection and even ridicule of "the guy who thinks he knows all about show business" never discourage me. I taught Sunday school when I was a teenager in Providence, and one of the lessons I still remember was the one in St. Luke about the



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guy who rejoiced when he found his lost sheep. Hollywood is a wilderness and there are a lot of sheep (mostly ewe lambs) in it.

It was something of a shock to me to discover just how much of a wilderness Hollywood really is. It is especially dangerous where ewe lambs are concerned. Beauty and sex appeal are almost a drug on the market in Hollywood and because of this extraordinary condition there is a different attitude toward show girls than there is anywhere else. I got my first shock in this connection when I started putting together that first show at the Florentine.

"The union demands that we pay chorus girls \$30 a week," said the owners. They spoke in tones of disgust which I didn't understand until they explained that the scale had been \$25.

"Thirty a week!" I gasped. "That's ridiculous. They should be paid at least fifty!" I was embarrassed to offer any girl even that.

Obviously, the economic condition in California was far different from New York. On Broadway, as I have said, my girls received a minimum of \$100 a week. Ziegfeld paid \$150 or more.

Today, the situation has improved considerably in California, but, in my judgment, it is far from equitable. The minimum is \$85 a week, while living costs are almost on a par with New York.

There were other revelations. One day three young fellows came into the Florentine with a pretty girl. Two of them were actors who have since become important in films. One of them approached me. "Do you see the girl we have with us?" he asked, nodding toward his table. She was an unusually beautiful girl, and since our show did not have an oversupply of beauty at that time, I was interested.

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"Well," he said, "three of us guys had her this afternoon. We're tired of her and we'd like to dump her. If you just promise you'll put her in your show, you can take her home with you tonight."

In New York, if an actor wanted to go out with this kind of girl, his chief concern would be his own reputation. He would sneak her out through the kitchen, and afterward forget he ever saw her.

Another time I was talking to an ambitious kid in my show who seemed to me to have star potentials. "Granny," she said disconsolately, "I don't think I can take it."

She unfolded what I was later to discover was a typical tale of woe. Her struggle to get into the movies had run against the fringe that infests this business, the phonies. They were telling her that she would have to sleep with the right men to get the job she wanted.

So many girls have been handed this line that a lot of them think it's the only way to reach stardom. They can't believe that the important studios do not operate that way in their selection of film talent.

I was enjoying a pool-side party one afternoon when my host said, "Granny, there's a girl coming over this afternoon I think you'll be interested in. She's beautiful, but real snooty. She thinks everyone in show business is a tramp."

My host did not exaggerate. On the basis of looks she was a dream. She perched on a chaise longue beside me and I soon discovered that the rest of his description fit, too.

"So you're in show business," she said, as if she'd like to end the conversation right there.

"Yes," I said. "Are you?"

"Show business? Not me!" she snapped. "What's more, I don't want to be." She sounded pretty bitter about it.

"Why not?" I asked, egging her on.



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"It's a lousy business, filthy. I'll have no part of it!"

"Sounds to me like you've already had a taste of it."

"I have. I was doing all right as a model in Chicago and everyone told me I ought to be in pictures. Now, I'm going back."

"Yeah, I know," I said. "There even used to be a song that said 'You ought to be in pictures,' but I still think the people who told you that were right. You really ought to be in pictures, otherwise you're wasting a lot of talent and good looks."

Her response was a very icy stare, as if to say, "Here's that old routine again." But I didn't continue. Believe it or not, I can talk about other things besides show business, and after a while she began to thaw out a little. Later, when I was bowing out, she herself brought the subject up again.

"What do you think I ought to do, Mr. Granlund?"

"See a top agent," I said. "Pick one that's on the up and up. I've got a pal in the business named Louis Shurr. Go see him."

I almost bumped into her a few weeks later on the Columbia lot. "Hi," I said. "How're you doin'?"

"I took your advice," she said. "I went to see Mr. Shurr." And Doc Shurr, it seems, had recognized the same thing I saw in her, had gone to work for her, had landed a contract for her.

"That's wonderful!" I said, as pleased as I could be.

"I'm living down at the Studio Club," she said. "Want to drive me over?"

I said, "Hop in," and motioned to my car. "We're on our way."

"I hope I'm on my way," she said, a little wistfully.

"You are," I said, and my confidence was not faked. Know-



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ing the kind of girl that Kim Novak is, I'll say this, that whatever she gets she'll get on her own and honestly.

I've come to the conclusion that any girl who comes to Hollywood hoping for a cinema contract must have five qualifications:

Beauty and sex appeal, first and foremost.

Sufficient money to tide her over a long, rough period of knocking on doors. Hollywood is one big room with sixty doors. She may have to try them all before she finds one that'll open.

Ambition, the ability to take it on the chin and still keep coming back for more, plus the will to train incessantly.

Discrimination, in the companions she chooses, the friends she makes, the agents she employs, and in herself.

All other things being equal (i.e., have all the above assets), luck.

I could tell a dozen stories that would point up each one of these qualifications. Any girl who has been to Hollywood can tell her own.

Assuming that a girl has all the allure, perfect figure, sex appeal that she needs, if she doesn't have the money to cover her expenses while she knocks on doors, the typical jobs open to her are modeling, for photographers or style shows, and work in the chorus of some night club. She gets some photographs of herself and in her off hours she trudges the rounds of photographers and agencies to sell herself. Her feet ache and her heart likewise. There are a number of fine modeling agencies, photographers, or booking agencies that treat a girl with consideration. There are a whole lot of others who have an "angle," as I've said. It takes time to get around and meet the right ones. So the best advice I can give is to come prepared. It's a lot easier to be discriminating in one's choice of friends, if you have the money to avoid obligations. It's a

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lot easier to study, to prepare for that big opportunity, if you don't have to worry about a place to sleep and something to eat.

And luck? How can one push that? I don't know. It doesn't help "to be seen in all the right places." I'm convinced of that. It is generally a waste of time, and money. Movie scouts and picture directors don't look in the "right places" for talent. I know a lot of girls who would be important in pictures today if they had devoted as much time to training as running around to cabarets on the mistaken idea that it would further their chances. Some girls feel that to be seen in the swank spots is the quickest way to catch the eye of a film bigwig. I know of no one who has had that kind of luck recently. I can name a couple of them, though, who were discovered at drugstore soda fountains. Luck is pretty important in this business, but I don't think it can be pushed or manipulated.

It was luck when Joan Crawford tried on a new gown in my office and Marcus Loew came in at the critical time. Luck played a role on the stage the night Harriet Hilliard's partner shot himself with a blank cartridge and started the chain of events that made her Mrs. Ozzie Nelson. But I think that luck, when pushed, ceases to be luck.

Of course it's easy to hand out advice in generalities, but when you get down to specific cases it's different. When a youngster comes to me for advice, the first thing I try to do is get a line on background, qualifications, and character. Even then the role of counselor is a difficult one. But how I enjoy playing it!

There's no thrill like the thrill I get in the discovery of new talent, unless it's the thrill I get when someone I've helped remembers. And it doesn't make much difference whether it's a star who remembers, or one who didn't make the grade, I am always pleased. No matter what their accom-



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plishments are, gratitude proves what big people they really are. I still remember the Cicero I learned in Classical High: *Gratus animus est una virtus non solum maxima, sed etiam mater virtutum omnium reliquarum.* (A thankful heart is not only the greatest virtue, but the parent of all the other virtues.) The man or woman who can remember with gratitude a friendly gesture has learned how to live, whether or not he has acquired fame or fortune. Take the case of Margie Himes, for instance.

Margie was a show girl, and so gorgeous that all Broadway idolized her. At one time she was in a Shubert show with Joan Crawford. She appeared in a Winter Garden production with Willie and Eugene Howard. She was the life of the party and there were many parties. "It's a short life," she used to say. "Let's make it shorter."

Margie lived it and loved it a little too much. When she hit the skids, she was well oiled, but literally. I had a lot of shows going at the time, so she always knew how to find me. I was always good for a touch, although I could never be sure how she spent it. Finally she stopped coming round and I never saw her again. I have remembered her over the years (I've seen plenty of others to remind me of her), and I've often wondered what happened to her. Then the other day, shortly before I began this chapter, I received this letter:

My Dear Friend:

I see by the papers you are writing a book. You could write a dozen of them! Goodness knows you have enough material.

I am being a very good girl these days. I work at a hotel as chambermaid. I've been here four years, and many's the time I think how grand you were to me. You never turned me down, and you owed me nothing.



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Do you remember when I was at the Globe in *Criss Cross*, the Fred Stone show? Well, one night I had been imbibing backstage and I heard my music cue, which was "Valencia." I dashed on stage without my bra! Johnny Coakley was in it. He said, "Come out that way all the time." How I threw my chances away and was such a dope!

I love my job, and I want to tell you a funny thing. You know, there's booze all around me, but I don't touch it now. One day my lovely boss said, "Margaret, I admire you because you never take a drink." I smile, and I think, Gosh, I could make her hair stand on end, she'd get an awful shock if she knew I was the original rummy!

With God's help, I am living at last. After all is said and done, it's better to be a has-been than a never-was. Though I earn very little, I feel like a million and can hold my head up and try to help those less fortunate and keep saying, "There, but for the grace of God, go I."

There has never been anyone like you, Granny, and I trod the boards for them all. But God is good, Granny, and you will always be remembered for helping the down and out. Bless you,

Sincerely,

MARGIE HIMES

Bless you, Margie. And bless all the rest of the wonderful guys and dolls who made the show-business story of N. T. G. such a happy memory.

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*(Continued from front flap)*

movies; he ran the zaniest radio station ever to sparkle through the ether and, more recently, put on a television program that flourished for four years uninterruptedly.

He was a close friend of Damon Runyon, and he knew in real life many of the fabulous characters Runyon immortalized in fiction. He put Texas Guinan in the nightclub business, and that opened Broadway's most fabulous night era — in Runyon's phrase, the Era of Wonderful Nonsense. He realized a personal dream with the Hollywood and the Paradise, pleasure spots that marked a revolution in after-dark entertainment.

But in the hearts of countless people in show business, including many of today's greats, N.T.G. will be remembered above all for the boost he gave them when they were struggling show girls or hopeful hoofers worried about the rent or dinner. He has helped a lot of little people become big people—more, it has been said, than anyone else living — and the list is still growing. "He's given so many kids a break," said one famous comedian not long ago, "they must all call him blessed."

That is N.T.G., the colorful, talented, big-hearted Swede who has lived the nonfiction story of guys and dolls and who has recalled it all as no one else could.

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